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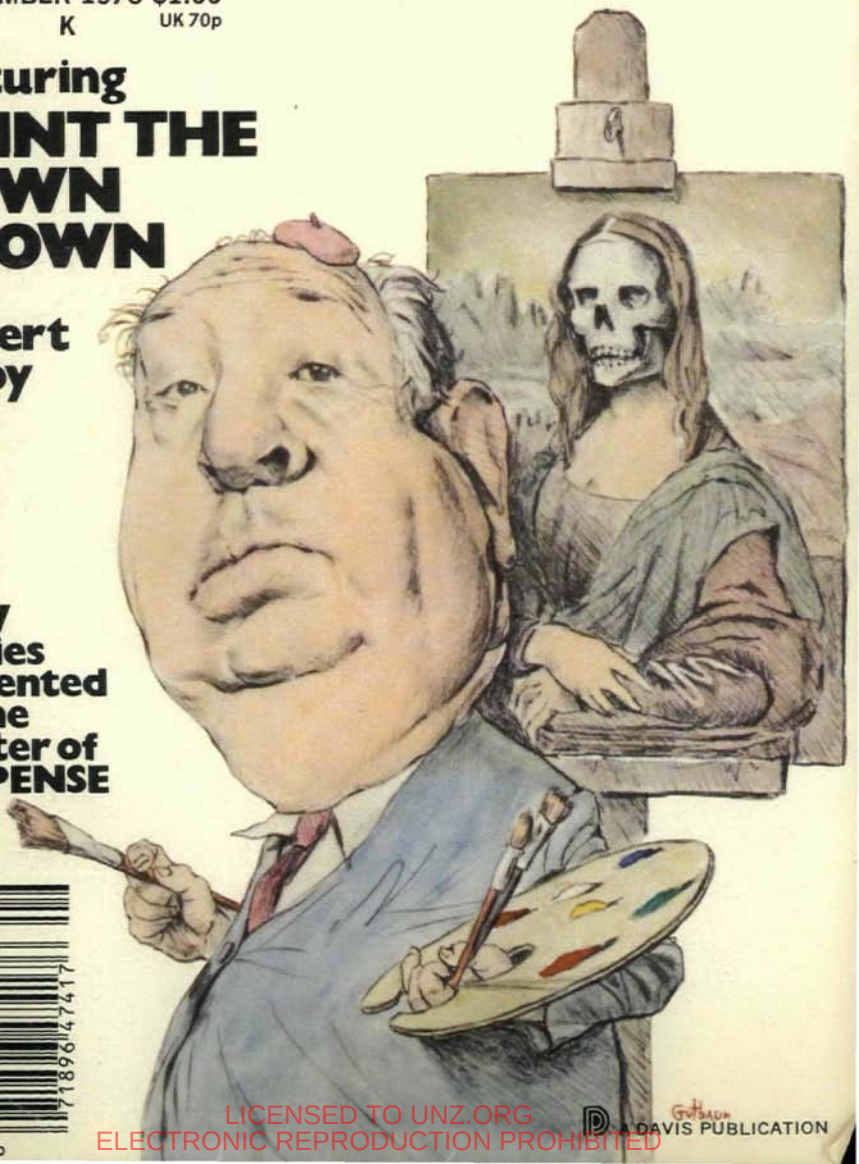

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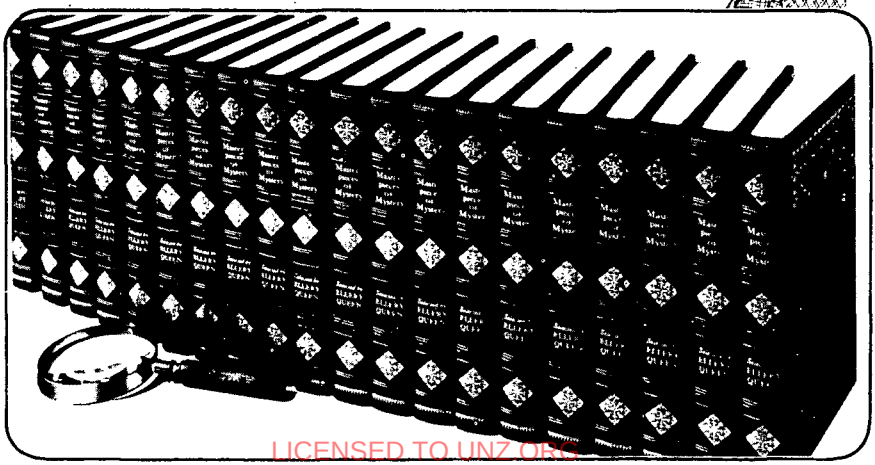

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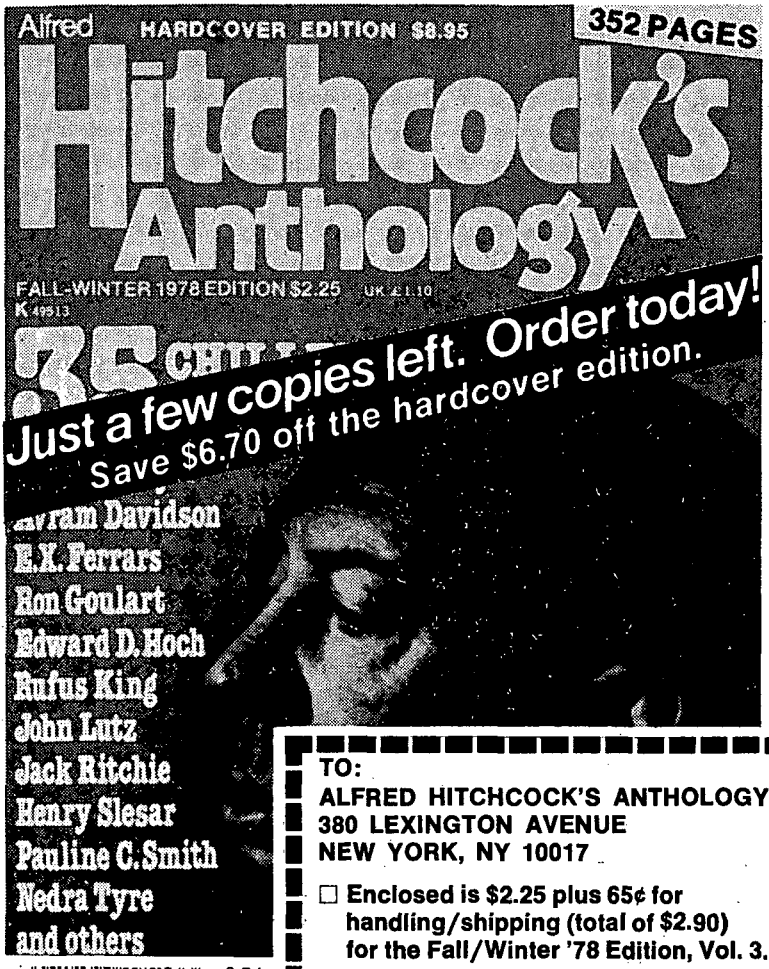

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VOLUME 23, NO. 9 SEPTEMBER 1978

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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September 1978

Dear Reader:

Most of our authors this month have their minds thoroughly involved with the act of murder, which Thomas De Quincey assures us will surely lead to procrastination.

We, however, will waste no time at all as we quickly turn the pages of September's stories. You will meet a new detective this month in the person of Dearborn V. Pinch, an irascible septuagenarian who is highly concerned with the exigencies of time in Edith Piñero Green's *An Hour to Kill*.

A group of cartoonists gets together for some fun time in Ron Goulart's *Out of the Inkwell*, but there are more errors than fun in William Bankier's *A Game of Errors*. An old man and a bank robber talk about the years left to them in Alvin S. Fick's *Blueprint for a Bridge*, and an old friend of ours, T. C. Brock, has time to spare for a Mexican vacation in Robert Colby's *Paint the Town Brown*.

We think you'll find this a timely collection of stories that may make you forget to keep track of the hours.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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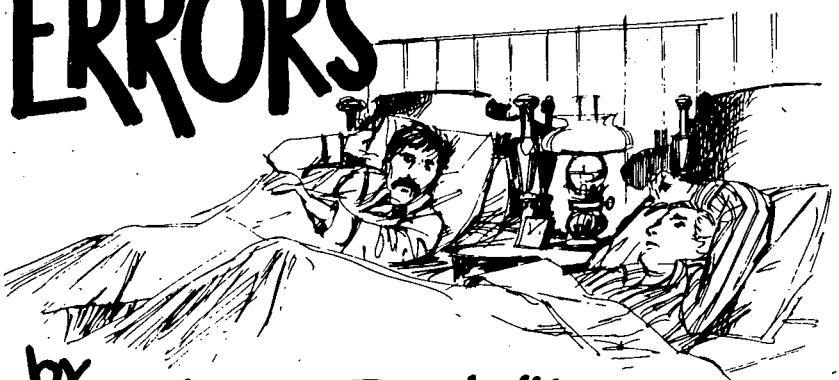
Was Spider's death a jinx for the team? . . .

A GAME OF ERRORS



by WILLIAM BANKIER

Spider Migicovsky left Montreal early on a cold February Saturday, drove 600 miles a day for three days, and arrived in New Orleans at around four o'clock on Monday afternoon. He checked into a hotel on Conte Street in the Old Quarter and went strolling on Bourbon Street. Girls were drifting by in short skirts and open-necked blouses. He entered the Desire Oyster Bar and ordered a beer. The waiter brought a bottle of Bud and poured it into a tulip glass, the rim of which had

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been rubbed in crushed ice. Sipping the beer, Migicovsky began to feel that accepting Alvin Parkhurst's invitation to join the team might not be so crazy after all.

The girl at the table by the door was lavishing adoration on her escort. Migicovsky watched the action in a mahogany-framed mirror beside the bar and decided this was a lucky fellow. Then he revised that opinion as the girl caught his eye and began sending the same kind of attention his way across the room. Obviously, playing love scenes was her game. But despite some superficial disapproval, Migicovsky felt a tightening in his stomach.

The big paddle fan under the ceiling rotated slowly, not moving much air but adding a lot of atmosphere. Migicovsky signaled for another beer and, as he finished the first one, he was filled with inappropriate elation. Parkhurst had offered no guarantees. The whole project could become a disaster whether or not it got off the ground.

The waiter poured the new beer. He was a seedy fellow with black vinyl hair and astonishing pale-blue eyes. "You're here early for the parade," he said.

"I'm not down for Mardi Gras," Migicovsky said. "Just a little holiday." Some holiday, chasing baseballs around an abandoned plantation. He would have to ask how to get to Sunset View and then decide whether to drive out there this evening or in the morning. Would all the others show up? They might. Parkhurst was such an optimist, he could get people working on some impossible foolishness and next thing you knew it came true.

The girl and her friend were getting ready to leave. They were looking his way now and Migicovsky could only think his Canadian accent had caught their attention. They made an attractive picture, both with smooth tanned features and identical shoulder-length sun-bleached hair. They might have been brother and sister.

Migicovsky drank the second beer, paid the waiter, and went outside. The girl was waiting a few paces along the sidewalk. He went up to her and said, "Where's your friend?"

"He had to go someplace."

He found himself walking hand-in-hand with her past open doorways, hearing the brassy lift of afternoon jazz, and inhaling from souvenir shops the fragrance of patchouli candles. Migicovsky bought a large bottle of white wine and they went back to the hotel, past the

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fountain in the forecourt, and up in the tiny mirrored elevator where she kissed her reflection and left silvery lips on the glass.

When he opened the door of the room she stepped inside and said, "Wow, a canopy over the bed!"

Migicovsky poured wine into tumblers and asked her name. She said, "Kiffy." When she asked who he was, he said his name was Lucien. That would get a laugh at the plantation if Lucien Lacombe showed up as advertised. The talented shortstop was a Montreal cop and would appreciate being brought into this situation by proxy.

When they were in bed Migicovsky had a vision of his wife Ellen back home, probably struggling at this moment to get boots and coats on her class of retarded kids. The girl kissed him again and he thought it was marvelous; join a ball team and see the world. He reached across her to pour more wine and somebody knocked on the door.

When Migicovsky opened the door, he was not entirely surprised to see the fraternal twin standing there. The boy smiled disarmingly. "Hi, I'm Keith," he said. "Is Kiffy here?"

Migicovsky let the boy into the room. Now he had a hell of a choice to make and he only hoped he was drunk enough.

On the back porch of the old plantation house, in a bamboo chair with a gin and tonic in his hand, Alvin Parkhurst waited for Jim Carlyle to say something. He hoped the brewer was not slipping into one of his periods of despondency. Parkhurst knew from long experience in servicing the Carlyle Brewery account that the boss could tumble into a depression and for a week or so nothing would be right. But not this week, please. Not when they were about to drag the glorious dream to the top of the hill and try to make it fly.

When the silence had lasted for a good three minutes, Parkhurst drank some gin and said, "Well, Mr. Jim, it's a beautiful sight." He was referring to the practice baseball diamond visible beyond a row of poplar trees.

"It should be beautiful," Carlyle said. "It cost me enough."

Carlyle was not a mean man. All that was required was that he believe in an enterprise and he would put millions behind it. As public-relations consultant, Parkhurst had been involved in expensive campaigns on behalf of various brands of beer. He had watched Jim Carlyle

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go all the way with a few winners—and more than one loser. Parkhurst hoped his Montreal Seekers would be in the former category. But it would take time, and the backer would have to be kept interested.

"Wait till tomorrow," he said. "The players will all be here, and the press. You'll see, Mr. Jim, the reporters want us to succeed." He gestured with his glass at the flood of red in the sky. "It's going to be a beautiful day for it," he added.

The sound of a car engine and tires on gravel turned their heads to the side of the house. A dark-blue sedan rolled into view, wheeled, and came to a stop close to the massive dead oak. The Quebec plate on the trunk was reassuring; the clans were gathering. The door opened and a familiar figure appeared in fawn slacks and a white golf shirt. Lucien Lacombe. He saw the two men on the porch and waved. "This must be the place," he called. A grin lifted his black moustache up close to the large sunglasses.

"*Bienvenue*, Lucy!" Parkhurst answered.

"Welcome aboard!" Carlyle shouted, sounding a touch more confident.

Lacombe began to approach the porch but changed his mind, went back to the car, opened the trunk, and took out a couple of baseball gloves and a dingy baseball. As he trotted onto the grass, Parkhurst called, "Oh, yeah!" and set down his glass. Carlyle left the porch while Parkhurst opened the screen door and went inside. When he reappeared with a third glove and bat, he had to run to catch the other two, who were passing under the poplars in the direction of the new ball diamond.

Carlyle covered first, Lacombe went between second and third, and Parkhurst stood at the plate with the bat, hitting grounders just hard enough to make his companions run to cover them, dropping the bat, and adjusting his glove to take the throw at home.

The light was fading. Parkhurst was a little drunk and some of the throws coming in were wild and excessively hard, but he felt nothing other than an overwhelming sense of elation. This was what it was all about—not investing money, not making a point with the media and the major leagues. It was about hitting and running and throwing and catching. It was about playing baseball.

The bounce of headlights in the dusk signaled another arrival up at the house. Car doors slammed and voices called across the open

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ground. "Baseball in the dark?"

"Now I understand how we're going to win."

It sounded like Elfstrom and Mott. They had driven over from Florida together, taking some days off from covering the legitimate National League teams at their spring training camps. Elfstrom and Mott had been cynical about the concept of the Seekers, possibly because their experience covering the Expos for Montreal radio had taught them how difficult it is to field a professional baseball team. But they were also very good players. It would be up to Parkhurst to convince them, to motivate them.

"Get yourselves a beer!" he yelled. "Inside. Put on some lights, we're coming up."

"Beer and electric lights!" boomed the professional radio voice of Ivan Elfstrom. "Damn the expense!"

Parkhurst took bat, ball, and glove and led the way back through the poplar trees towards the plantation house. Carlyle and Lacombe followed him. If only Johnny Fist was available to play on the team, he thought. But there was no chance. Jonathan Fitzwilliam was in hiding somewhere following his insane attack on the premier of Quebec Province. Parkhurst wondered how a man with so much going for him could let politics and violence screw up his life.

Carlyle and Lacombe went past at a trot, reached the porch, clattered through the screened doorway, and became part of the movement of laughing men visible in a lighted rectangle within the dark frame of the house.

Parkhurst plodded on. Granted, Johnny Fist could hit a ton, but never mind him. What about Martin Milligan? There was a player to mourn if you felt like weeping for the past. With Milligan pitching the Seekers might even win a few games. On the mound for New York, he had won more than twenty for three seasons in a row. But Milligan was dead, accidentally gunned down years ago by cops here in New Orleans.

Parkhurst thought of something as he reached the porch. Had he established the training camp in New Orleans out of respect for Milligan? Did he hope the great pitcher's ghost would inhabit the infield and give the team some professional magic? He pulled open the door and went into the kitchen. The room felt chilly now and he closed the inner door. "Come down the hall," he said. "I'll light a fire."

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They followed him along the narrow corridor carrying their drinks. Gary Mott said, "It's clever to put this dead team in a haunted house. Good thinking, Al."

"Never mind the haunted house," Ivan Elfstrom rumbled. "Those are going to be real live reporters here tomorrow. I want to hear what Al says to them."

All you had to do was believe. Parkhurst believed completely as he said, "The press *wants* a ball team like this one. The entire world of professional baseball wants it. We are going to provide it."

Confirming what Alvin Parkhurst had said the night before, a lot of first-class reporters showed up at Sunset View for the briefing. It was a glorious afternoon. Parkhurst made the most of it by assembling the group on the new bleachers erected beside the practice diamond. His players, looking impressive in their fresh uniforms—pale-blue with a blue-and-white cap—stood at ease in a line behind him. They were perspiring from the recently concluded warm-up; Parkhurst's clammy shirt was the result of anxiety. Jim Carlyle was introduced as the financial resource behind the enterprise. He said a few words and handed it back to Parkhurst.

Parkhurst began by telling the reporters what they knew. Big league baseball was not what it used to be. A name player would miss months of a season holding out for a half million dollars, dissatisfied with the quarter million he was getting. The major concern of some teams was not whether they could defeat other teams but whether the union could beat management over the winter layoff. Hostility approaching hatred was building up between diamond and front office. With or without justification, the game was turning into a copy of life in the Kentucky coalfields. And was playing baseball, when you came to the crunch, the same as mining coal? Parkhurst said he hoped the hell not.

"This is a *game*," he said. "We start out playing it for fun. Every kid in America and Canada dreams of summer so he can run out onto the grass and start throwing and hitting the ball. The good ones advance and the rest of us pay money to watch them play. But if they aren't enjoying it, if the main subject on their minds is money, then they ought to forget it. Because the average guy in the stands would give his eye teeth just to be able to get out of his office or factory and earn any kind of living on a baseball diamond."

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The reporters were not laughing. Sophisticated men from the leading newspapers and networks, they were watching Parkhurst carefully and making notes.

"The Montreal Seekers," he went on, "are an experiment. An attempt to show major league baseball the way to go. The men behind me are good baseball players, but they are not pros. Given the right twist of luck, one or two of them might have made it to the big leagues."

"Thanks, coach," Ivan Elfstrom said.

"He means me," Gary Mott said.

Parkhurst laughed along with the reporters. Then he went on: "The Seekers are going to play for a salary of fifteen thousand dollars a man. Obviously, established stars who help produce huge revenues at the gate and from TV coverage deserve more money. But my men are making a point. Fifteen grand is not bad pay for eight months' work, and they would play the game for less as long as a decent future for their families could be guaranteed."

The approach of a sedan bearing police markings did not go unnoticed. The players and many of the reporters watched it roll across the grassy area and park beyond the row of poplars. Parkhurst saw it but paid attention to the reporter who was asking a question.

"It's one thing for you to assemble this team. From what I've seen, you've got some talent. But so what, if you never meet major league opposition? I can't see the established players holding still for what you're doing. What's in it for them?"

"Good point," Parkhurst said. He glanced at the two uniformed figures and the man in plainclothes getting out of the police car. "I happen to be on good terms with Meldon Michaels who used to manage the Expos. He's now with Boston, and Mel has guaranteed me a couple of exhibition games over in Pensacola. We intend to build on the results of those games."

The reporter grinned. "If the results are 11–0 and 17–0, what have you proved?"

"Results like that would prove that the Seekers don't belong on the same field with a major league ball team. But it isn't going to happen. Come to the games. You'll see guys you never heard of taking a real good run at the best in the world."

"So it's your intention," the reporter said, "to try and shame the

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major leagues into de-emphasizing money and getting back to baseball."

"Your words, not mine," Parkhurst said. "But if the fans flock to watch the Seekers play their guts out, maybe there'll be a message there for somebody."

The newcomers walked onto the diamond. The uniformed men stood back while the detective confronted the manager. "Are you Parkhurst?" he asked, glancing at a small pad in his hand.

"I'm Al Parkhurst. Hello."

"Do you know a man named Migicovsky?"

"Spider Migicovsky. He's my first baseman. We're waiting for him."

"Don't hold your breath. He's dead."

There was a reaction among players and reporters. Parkhurst felt as if he had been struck in the stomach. "Was there an accident?"

"Worse than that," the detective said. "Somebody came into his hotel room and smashed his head."

Reese and Harmony moved about the dining room clearing away after dinner, which the four Canadians seemed to have enjoyed despite their almost complete silence over the past hour. Reese had short grey hair and amber eyes and a sturdy physique and he looked in good shape for his sixty-five years. His wife Harmony was twenty years younger and still attractive as a woman, with a subtle tone of midnight blue in her skin. They had worked at Sunset View as cook and bartender when it was a restaurant. Now it had gone bust, but if these Northerners could make their baseball camp work, it might be a new lease on life.

Jim Carlyle got a cigar going and said, "Reese, why don't you make us all a Ramos gin fizz?"

"I'll do that," Reese said.

With the servants out of the room and the business of eating completed, the silence seemed due to end. Setting down her coffee cup, Antonia Carlyle said, "I'm not superstitious, but it's a bad sign. Opening day for your project, the press all on hand, and what's the big news? Your first baseman's been murdered."

"It was just bad luck," Parkhurst said. He looked at Antonia at the far end of the table. Her auburn hair was parted crisply in the middle and drawn back to make a frame around her elegant face. She had al-

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ways looked aristocratic to him—her blue crystal eyes set wide apart, her perfectly shaped lips—even when she was just another student at Baytown High School. Now, married to most of the money in Montreal, a member of Upper Westmount society, she seemed to have risen to her appointed level and slipped herself into place with a click audible only to those who had known her before.

"Bad luck is right," said Lucien Lacombe. He gnawed at the fringe of his moustache. "One thing we didn't need was to cross paths with a maniac."

"I'm sorry it fell on you two," Carlyle said, "to have to go and identify him."

Lacombe shrugged. "It was bad, but I've seen worse. Migicovsky went the easy way. He must have been asleep."

"How do they know that?" Carlyle asked.

"Because he was under the blanket, head and all, when the first blow was struck. That one did it. All the rest were extra."

Antonia looked at Parkhurst and then away. "Sick," she said.

"It was lucky for the killer," Parkhurst said. "The detective told us the blanket kept the blood contained, otherwise he'd have come out of there covered with it."

Reese appeared from the kitchen with four Ramos gin fizzes looking like vanilla milk shakes in tall champagne glasses. He began setting them down.

"Have they anything to go on?" Carlyle asked.

"Not much," Parkhurst said. "The desk clerk saw Migicovsky come in and go upstairs with a girl. He identified her as extremely pretty."

"Good for Migicovsky," Carlyle said. His wife sighed, and two spots of color appeared in the brewer's cheeks.

"A young man went upstairs a little later," Parkhurst went on. "He resembled the girl. The clerk didn't see either of them leave but there's a side door off the lobby. That's about all, Mr. Jim."

Reese paused in setting down Parkhurst's drink. Parkhurst glanced up and saw the old man looking at him hard.

"It could be a variation of the badger game," Lacombe said. "Migicovsky is picked up by this girl. They go to the room and then her quote husband unquote comes to the door. The embarrassed mark becomes an easy shake-down."

"It doesn't fit," Parkhurst said. "For one thing, Migicovsky wasn't

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robbed; there was money in his wallet. And he was killed in his sleep, remember?" Saying it aloud convinced Parkhurst that he could not buy this theory. It felt wrong. He could not imagine Spider Migicovsky, newly arrived in New Orleans, tucking himself in the sack for a nap at five in the afternoon. Not the Migicovsky who, by his own admission, fell in love several times a day. Parkhurst himself had a painful memory to support this claim.

"If you folks want anything else, you just call out for Reese, hear?" The old man passed through into the kitchen, casting a sharp glance back at Parkhurst.

They moved to the lounge where three huge logs were blazing in the fireplace. Everybody accepted whisky from Carlyle except Lacombe, who had been trying to abstain all evening. "I'm supposed to make like a ball player now," he said. "I shouldn't even have had that gin fizz."

The fire was warm and Parkhurst's eyes wanted to close. He roused himself by telling a story and was halfway through it before he realized he was going on about Baytown and that Antonia was laughing while Jim Carlyle sat half-hidden in a wingback chair and smiled politely from the shadow. Parkhurst cut it short. It was enough that his hometown friendship with Antonia had given him a foot inside the door of Carlyle Breweries as PR consultant. By stressing their connection in the mysterious past, he was only making Jim uncomfortable.

But, Lord, she had been sweet in his arms at the tea dances in the high school gymnasium. She wore penny loafers then, as all the girls did, and a pleated skirt with a sloppy-joe sweater, the cute white collar of her blouse turned up under her chin. She was willing to dance close, too, in the slow numbers, her smooth hair touching his cheek and smelling of lilacs. So nice, till the tap on the shoulder and there was Jonathan Fitzwilliam cutting in. Nobody said no to big John.

"Somebody we could use on the team," Parkhurst said, making the transition from Baytown to the safe ground of baseball, "is Fitzwilliam. Can you imagine him batting clean-up?"

"I can," Carlyle said. "I can also imagine him compounding our problems with the police. If he showed up, Lucien would arrest him. Right?"

"John is wanted all right," Lacombe said gloomily.

"Why a successful man would fall in with people who want to over-

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throw the government, I'll never understand." Carlyle's frown was darker than ever.

Parkhurst shook his head. "It's a shame," he said.

The PR man yawned. "Big day tomorrow. Shall we hit the sack, Lucien?"

The bedroom was chilly after the fireside. Both men undressed quickly and sought the protection of blankets. Parkhurst's bed was closer to the door; he could see the dark shape that was Lucien Lacombe silhouetted against the window. The shape rearranged itself and Lacombe's laconic voice asked the key question. "Do you think we'll be able to play?"

"No reason why not."

"The papers will be full of Migicovsky. Not exactly what the Seekers needed."

"Are you hinting at a plot, Lucy?"

Lacombe cleared his throat and Parkhurst smiled in the dark; his friend did it with a French-Canadian accent. "Think of it this way," the policeman said. "If we succeed, we'll bring fan pressure against the higher-salaried players."

"That's part of the idea."

"So what's to prevent one or more of those players from paying a hit man to come in and do a job on Migicovsky?" After a doubting silence, Lacombe added, "There are plenty who could afford it."

"Sorry, Lucien," Parkhurst said. "We're not that kind of a threat at the moment. Maybe next year. Besides, why would they pick out Migicovsky? He's nobody."

But Spider Migicovsky was somebody all right. Parkhurst clearly recalled the afternoon almost two years ago when Ellen Migicovsky rang the office and asked to talk to him about Leonard. It was one of the few times he had heard anyone use Migicovsky's first name. At Ellen's request, Parkhurst came round to the school in Cote St. Luc where she looked after a group of retarded kids.

Ellen was petite, dark-haired, and as serious as a professional mourner. Parkhurst had expected to hear about some problem of Ellen's and her husband's. And he did. But it also involved his own wife, Juanita, which made it his problem too.

"I've been waiting for it to stop," Ellen said. "Leonard has behaved

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this way before. But this time he won't quit. So I guess Juanita must be encouraging him. Anyway, I decided you had to be told."

Juanita *was* encouraging the young lawyer. Parkhurst knew it as soon as he introduced the subject at home that night over their evening drink. She made no attempt to disguise the situation—she flaunted it. If Alvin Parkhurst was going to work fourteen hours most days, Juanita Parkhurst was not about to vegetate. She was not bred to boredom.

"I'm sorry about the long days," Parkhurst had said. "It won't always be like this. I'm still getting started." But something told him his work addiction was chronic. He liked working—he couldn't help it.

"Do as you like," Juanita said. "I can take care of myself." There was not much trace in her now of the carefree girl he had met at the Trinidad-Tobago dance.

"Maybe we'd better try it apart for a while," Parkhurst had said.

Juanita only sipped her drink and looked at him, "Do as you like."

Parkhurst rolled over on creaking springs and forced his mind away from the depressing past. He was an optimist; tomorrow they would get into the coach and drive to Pensacola and meet the Boston Bears in one of the exhibition games promised him by Meldon Michaels. They would win or come close. The Seekers would surprise everybody, and things would be all right.

From the other bed, Lacombe said, "You can't sleep either, eh?"

"I've been asleep for half an hour," Parkhurst said. "Shut up, Lucien."

There was a fair-sized crowd in the ball park at Pensacola. Partly it was because Meldon Michaels had brought the Boston Bears into fourth place last season, their first as a new National League franchise. So fan interest was high. But Parkhurst wanted to believe people were also curious to discover how the Seekers would do against top-class opposition.

Standing midway between the dugouts during the warm-up, Michaels put an arm around Parkhurst's shoulder. "See that corner of the bleachers over there?" He pointed. "Those are your people. All the rest, up there and around both sides and up here behind us, these are all mine."

"Yes, coach, you're right, coach," Parkhurst said. He looked at the baseball manager's prematurely grey hair cropped to Marine Corps

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length, his square jaw, his wintery eyes. As always, Michaels smelled of after-shave. Parkhurst remembered the first time he met the man in Montreal when he drove to Jarry Park to discuss a product endorsement. On that day, early in the afternoon of a night game, he found Michaels alone in right field chipping shots with a 7-iron and a bunch of golf balls. He was impressed with the manager's no-nonsense approach to the business scheme. It did well for both of them and they had been friendly ever since.

Jim Carlyle approached. "Nice day for the game," he said.

"Mr. Carlyle," Michaels said, adopting his needling tone, "with respect, why doesn't a man with all your money put it behind a *real* ball team?"

Carlyle answered, "If I decide to, I'll make an offer for yours. But only after they've played us a couple of times. They should come cheap by then." His face was so serious he might or might not have been kidding.

As far as the game was concerned, there were no miracles that day. The Bears won 5–2. But the Seekers did not look out of place and they made some outstanding plays that had the crowd applauding. Most noticeable was their enthusiasm, their hustle. They were clearly enjoying the contest and their attitude influenced the opposition; the Bears, who began as if they were bored, by the seventh inning were buckled down and playing to win.

"Did you see that double play?" Lucien Lacombe was striding around the dressing room in a towel, too excited to get dressed. "Did you see that double play?"

Gary Mott sat on a bench holding a cold tin of beer against the reddish bruise on his arm where he had taken an inside fast ball in order to gain first base. "You were Hall of Fame today, Lucy. We were all Hall of Fame." Mott sipped beer from the foaming triangle in the top of the can.

"A word of advice," Ivan Elfstrom called to Mott from an open locker where he was brushing his crisp red hair, peering into a shard of mirror. "Next time, take the pitch on your head. Why should you suffer pain?"

Lacombe continued to pace on the concrete floor. "We'll beat those guys next time," he told them.

The detective met Parkhurst and Carlyle in the parking lot as they

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followed their players to the waiting bus. "Hello there," Parkhurst said, not sure he was happy to see the man. "I didn't know you were a fan."

"When I was a kid, I cheered for the Braves when they were still in Boston. I've never been able to get used to them in Milwaukee or Atlanta. Now Boston has the Bears, I don't mind driving a couple of hundred miles on a nice day."

"Did you enjoy the game?"

"It was a good effort." The detective smiled. He was a man in his early fifties who dressed in a dead suit of gabardine that could once have been blue, wore glasses with one hinge mended by a paper clip, and had teeth like an ear of golden bantam corn. "Of course you realize," he said, "they weren't really trying today."

Carlyle bridled. "Their center fielder tore a ligament going for that line drive in the eighth."

"That kid is a hot dog. Conway is the Bears' center fielder. Conway bats .325 and he'd have been in position to catch that drive."

"Thanks for the encouragement," Parkhurst said. He turned away. Carlyle moved on and entered the bus.

"Wait a minute," the detective said. "We've made some progress in your case."

"Yeah?"

"I questioned a man from Jackson, Mississippi, staying in a room down the hall. He says he was on his way to the elevator around the time of the killing and saw a girl and a young guy come out of the room and head down the stairs."

"Then they're the ones."

"No, they're clear. This man had to go back to his room for something. So about three minutes later he was on his way back to the elevator and he saw a maid come out of the same room."

"So?" For some reason, Parkhurst began to feel uneasy.

"So Migicovsky can't have been dead at that time or the maid would have reported it."

"What does the maid say?"

"She was off duty today." The detective used his tongue to make a couple of contented noises with the big teeth. "So I decided to take the day off too. I'll question her tomorrow."

Parkhurst said, "That's terrific. We may not be big-league ball

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players but we do our job better than you do yours." He mounted the steps and the bus door thudded shut behind him.

The parting criticism must have hit home. The plantation house telephone rang at 9:30 the next morning as Reese was serving Harmony's good eggs and bacon. It was the detective, wanting to speak to Parkhurst. He had rounded up the maid and brought her together with the man from Jackson. No, she was not the same person.

"He was positive?" Parkhurst asked.

"Wrong color. The maid is ebony. The woman he saw was sepia."

"Where are we, then?"

"The other woman must have been the accomplice of the young couple," the detective said. "We're looking for all three."

There was exhilaration in the Seekers' camp that morning. The workout on the practice diamond was brisk. But Alvin Parkhurst was only half there. Lucien Lacombe confronted him after spending time in the batting cage. "What's wrong, Al? You look bad."

"I can't say yet. It's personal; it may not be anything."

"You sick?"

"No, I'm O.K." Parkhurst was not ready to discuss what was on his mind. It was only intuition at the moment, but he knew it could not be allowed to rest. One way or the other, he had to find out the truth. He made a decision.

"Do you feel like flying up home and seeing some snow?" he said to Lacombe, causing his friend to draw down his sunglasses with one finger and peer balefully over the gold frames.

Jim Carlyle was disturbed by his team manager's request for a couple of days off to return to Montreal, taking Lacombe with him. The secrecy bothered him most of all, but he accepted the explanation that it was personal and showed his consideration by saying, "Go safely. And hurry back."

Antonia met Parkhurst as he went to pack and asked, "Are you all right, Al?"

"I think so. I've just got to check something back home."

She said, "You know where your friends are, don't you?"

"I'm looking at one of my best," he said.

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Lucien was stowing his bag in the car and Parkhurst was about to follow him when Reese came through the screen door onto the porch. He looked troubled and determined. "I have to ask you something," he said. "Are you making fun of the way black people talk?"

Parkhurst was stunned. "Never. When?"

"You keep saying 'Mr. Jim' when you talk to Mr. Carlyle. I've never heard white people talk that way."

Parkhurst nodded. "You're right, Reese. It's unusual but there's a reason. Up in Montreal, the Carlyle Brewery is run by Jim's father, whose name is Edward, and there's another son named Peter. So around the office, it's confusing if each one is called Mr. Carlyle—right? So there's Mr. Edward and Mr. Jim and Mr. Peter. I'm in the habit, I guess."

The sturdy old man frowned throughout the explanation, then he said, "It isn't me—I don't care—it was Harmony who heard you." He took his hand from behind his back and pressed a package on Parkhurst. "Here's some ham sandwiches for the trip."

Montreal was heavily snowed in again, but like a drunk accustomed to hangovers the city was in the process of picking itself up and getting back in business. Parkhurst and Lacombe sat in a taxi crawling up Cote des Neiges. The snow at the side of the road was nine feet deep where the plows had pushed it aside. Ahead, a roaring snowblower attacked the mounds, inching ahead, devouring the snow and spewing it out into a dumptruck creeping along beside it. Five empty trucks moved behind the first one, ready to roll ahead and keep the assembly line going.

"Isn't it grand to be home?" Lucien said, watching the taxi meter flick up numbers.

"Mmmmm." Parkhurst was concentrating on tucking something into an envelope. He sealed it and gave it to his companion. "I may ask you for this at the apartment. If I do, don't question me, just hand it over."

Lacombe pocketed the envelope. "Don't mind me. I don't have to know what this trip is about."

"It may not be anything. It's a hunch of mine. If it proves out, then I'll need you around."

The taxi cleared the snowblower at last and took off like a cat, slewing back and forth in the slush forming under the high bright sun. "For

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the first time in my life I was South in February," Lacombe said. "At spring training! Then *you* get a hunch."

Juanita let the two men into the apartment on Ridgeway. It still looked a bit like home to Parkhurst even though he had not lived with her for a couple of years. There was a table with tiny glass animals she collected; several of them were gifts from him. Their wedding picture stood on the table by the mock fireplace. The bookshelves remained half empty; for whatever reason, Juanita had not replaced the volumes he had taken away. The room was dusty, all except the table with the glass figurines.

"How is New Orleans?" Juanita said. "The sports pages have been full of your big adventure."

"It is sunny and warm," Parkhurst said. "But you must know that."

"Of course. *The Gazette* said you've had great weather for your training." Parkhurst was standing near the window. She moved past him and stood looking down at the cemetery on the hillside. Cars were speeding up the Camillien Houde Expressway, taking the shortcut across the mountain. She turned and used a finger to trace the outline of his lapel. "You want a drink?"

"Not yet." Parkhurst looked at her beautiful face—her oriental eyes, patrician lips, and sepia-velvet skin. "How goes the career?" he asked. She worked for the International Aviation Authority doing translations between English, Spanish, and French.

"It's going very well. There's a chance I may move to New York. The United Nations needs translators."

"You'd do well in New York."

"I could get attacked on the street," she said. "Montreal is not very advanced when it comes to getting attacked on the street."

Lacombe sat down on a chair by the door.

Juanita seemed to see him for the first time. "*Bon jour, Lucien,*" she said. "*Veut-tu un whisky? Moi, je vais prendre un double.*"

"Well, if Alvin is going to. . ."

"Never mind that cement-faced priest, I think he's here to tell me something. And I intend to take it with a drop of scotch." She poured a drink for herself, forgetting Lacombe.

Parkhurst said, "It's about Migicovsky," and he saw Lacombe's eyebrows rise.

"Yes, I read about him too," Juanita said. "Very sad."

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"You didn't happen to read a description of the killer," Parkhurst said.

"How could I? They haven't found her."

Lacombe looked at Parkhurst who said, "At least we're agreed it was a woman."

"Well, of course. The paper said he took a girl to his room." Juanita sat down.

"That girl is cleared and so is her boy friend. We've heard from a witness, a guest in the hotel. He saw the killer coming out of the room." Parkhurst paused, then said softly, "He saw you, Juanita."

She laughed and then drank and said nothing.

"He's from Mississippi, so as far as he was concerned it was the maid he saw leaving Migicovsky's room. A sepia woman, not very black, but for him it had to be the maid. He saw you."

"Some witness," Juanita said. "Nobody would believe that."

"Perhaps not, but we have confirmation. There was a street photographer taking pictures outside the hotel. He's there every day. On the off-chance we checked his negatives, and there was a great shot of you." Parkhurst stared at Juanita for a moment, then said, "Give me the envelope, Lucien."

Lacombe started to speak, then closed his mouth and found the envelope tucked in with his wallet. He handed it to Parkhurst.

Parkhurst began to open the envelope, then paused. "You didn't have to kill him," he said. "He may have messed you around but you didn't have to kill him."

"Messed me around?" Juanita said. "That smug fool did something nobody has ever been able to do to me."

There was a fullness about her that Parkhurst had spotted instantly; gone was her gaunt fashion model's face. "He got you pregnant," he said.

The glass in her hands began to tremble so violently whisky spilled on her skirt. Parkhurst was transfixed. Lacombe arose, took the glass from her, and remained standing over her, watching his friend.

"You didn't have to kill him," Parkhurst repeated.

"There he was with those two pretty kids," Juanita said. "I'd flown all that way to talk to him, to tell him what had happened. I'll admit I'd been drinking on the plane but I wasn't gone. Not then. But seeing that bed, and the three of them looking so smug, so pleased with

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themselves . . ."

"The kids left before you did," Parkhurst said. "Were they there when you—"

"No. I said I was his wife and they got dressed and fled. He was laughing all the time. 'My wife!' he kept saying. Then I told him about the baby. He said at first it wasn't his. Then he said even if it was, he'd deny it. I told him it might look like him. He said he hoped not. And do you know the reason he gave?"

Parkhurst and Lacombe looked at her in silence.

"He said he didn't look good in brown."

They could believe it, knowing Migicovsky's sarcastic wit.

"For a while he made jokes out of everything I said. Then he said he was tired, he was going to sleep. The room was bright, so he pulled the blanket over his head. I watched him faking this slow steady breathing, pretending to be asleep."

Juanita stood up and walked to the table holding the glass animals. She picked up a brass candlestick from the mantelpiece beside it. "There was a heavy glass ashtray on the bedside table," she said. "I took it and hit him on the head, through the blanket. He rose up and fell back down. And I kept on hitting him—"

She lifted the candlestick and brought it down on the figurines—once, again, three times—before Parkhurst reached her and took hold of her arms. Fragments of bright glass littered the carpet.

"All right now?" Parkhurst said.

She put the candlestick in his hand. "Yes, I'm all right."

While Parkhurst dialed New Orleans, Lacombe poured three drinks. Jim Carlyle answered the phone at the plantation house and Parkhurst briefed him quickly on what the trip had confirmed. After expressing surprise and sympathy, Carlyle paused a few seconds and then said, "Alvin, can you sit on this information?"

"How do you mean, sit on it?"

"Migicovsky is dead anyway. That detective will pursue things for a while and then go on to more pressing matters. It happens all the time."

"But I know who the killer is, Mr. Jim. We both know now."

Carlyle's voice was persuasive; they might have been discussing the label design for the new lager. "Look at it this way. The Seekers can

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survive the murder of one of our players by person or persons unknown. That's bad luck, it can happen to anybody. Forgotten in a week. But this—the wife of the manager, infidelity, pregnancy—it's a mess, Alvin. The press will eat it up."

"Yes, I guess they will."

"You know it. And with the idealistic image of the team we've got going here—the good guys playing for the love of the game? Forget it, Alvin. If that story breaks, the dream is over."

"Does it have to be over, Mr. Jim?"

The voice on the phone became a little colder. "Let's just say Carlyle Breweries would not want to have its name associated with such an enterprise." When Parkhurst said nothing, Carlyle suggested, "Think about it. You're a practical man. There's a big advance ticket-sale for the next game with the Bears. Just come back down here, say nothing, and let's play baseball."

Parkhurst put down the telephone. "Well, Sergeant," he said, "what do we do now?"

"I shouldn't even be here," Lacombe said vacantly.

Parkhurst went to the settee and sat down beside Juanita. "Here's what we do," he said. "You leave me and my wife alone for a while. Go downtown and see your friends at Number Ten Station. Tell them what you know about the case and come back with a car and whoever else you need to make the arrest." Parkhurst felt Juanita's hand seek his; it felt small and compliant, as in the old days.

"Yeah. O.K." Lacombe went to the door. He paused with his hand on the latch. "We couldn't put it on hold and go back and have just that one more game with Boston? Does it have to be now?"

"That's right. Go and do it, Lucy," Parkhurst said. "It'll be another star in your crown."

They sat in the silent apartment listening to the sound in the corridor of the elevator arriving to fetch Lacombe. After a minute or so, Juanita said, "You never showed me the photograph."

He handed her the envelope. She took out the photo and looked at it. It was a snapshot in color of herself and Parkhurst clowning on the lawn outside a Laurentian cottage. He had been chopping wood and she had knelt to put her head on the block under his raised ax. They were both grinning at the camera in radiant sunlight.

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Juanita gave him a reproachful look. "There was no photographer outside that hotel."

"No. I had nothing but a hunch. I had to get you talking."

They had half an hour to wait before Lacombe would be back. Juanita got out the vacuum cleaner and picked up the broken glass from the carpet. Then she went ahead with a cloth and can of fragrant spray polish, dusting surfaces for the first time in months. Parkhurst watched her, thinking this wife of his was carrying Migicovsky's baby, that she had murdered the man, and that she had also put an end to the improbable but not impossible dream. So did he love her now or did he hate her? Both, he realized; nothing had changed.

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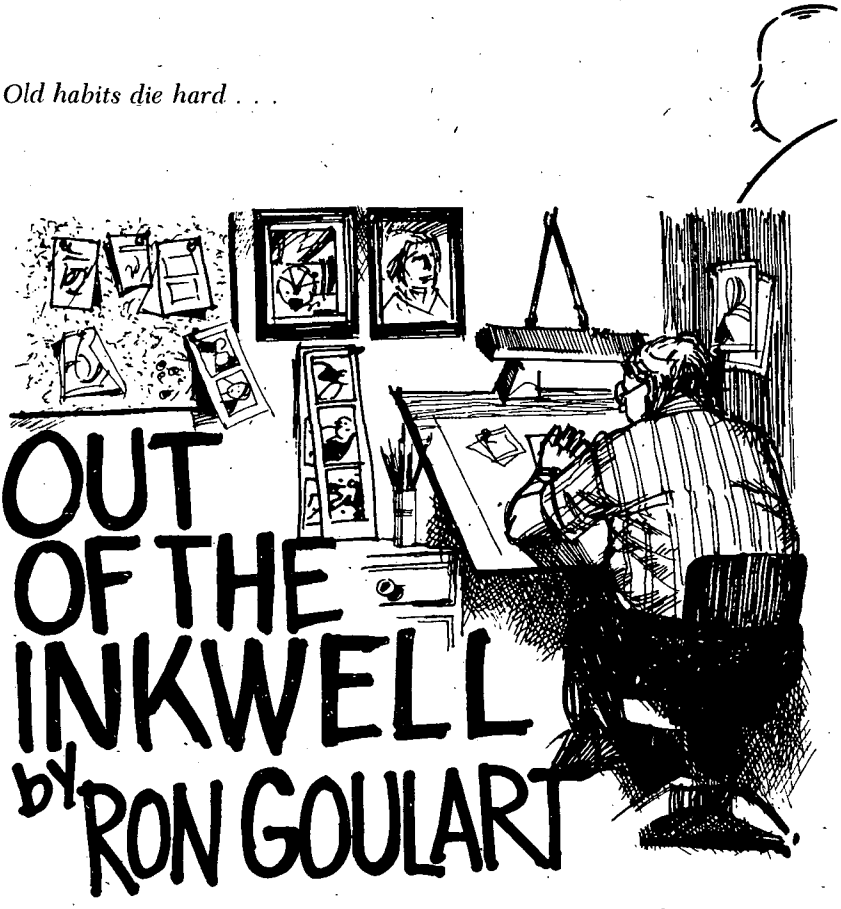

OUT OF THE INKWELL

by RON GOULART

We didn't start off to talk about murder.

It had been just the usual Monday lunch at the Inkwell Restaurant in Westport. The Inkwell sits practically on the Saugatuck River and a lot of artists, writers, and cartoonists hang out there, along with the expected mix of business types. We're all cartoonists, and our regular table is the one closest to the view window. Heinz had been telling us about how far ahead he was on his comic-strip deadlines and Ty Ban-

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ner had complained about what he suspected his latest wife was up to with his latest assistant. Zarley had finally managed to graduate to the pages of *The New Yorker,* and for some reason that made him want to tell several shaggy-dog stories in dialect.

Most of the time I don't say much. I have my one vodka and tonic and a Reuben sandwich and I watch the river and listen. Sometimes I talk about what went wrong with my Mercedes 220S during the past week, and on this particular afternoon I brought up the subject of my oldest daughter, who is living with a young upholsterer in nearby Norwalk.

"Those guys make good money," said Banner, tapping the stem of his martini glass. "My second wife ran off with an upholsterer. I still have a sofa and two chairs the guy did before he broke up my happy home."

"All your offspring go through a phase where they hate you," said Zarley, still with a trace of a Swedish accent. "Not only your own kids, but your relatives in general. They never look at your stuff, they mostly loathe you."

"Look at what happened to Hash Landon," put in Heinz. "There's a perfect example of how your kin feel about you when you're a cartoonist."

"Oh, that's an unusual case," I said. "Most of our relatives wouldn't murder us."

"My third wife," said Banner, "once came home from a consciousness-raising session and charged at me with a kitchen knife."

"Wasn't murder," said Will Hollins. He's almost as quiet as I am and everyone at the table turned toward him when he finally did speak.

"Sure it was," said Heinz. "Didn't they just finish the trial and find those two ingrates guilty? Murder one, cut and dried."

"Circumstantial evidence is what cooked those two. Plus which they couldn't figure out how to explain what really happened without making themselves look even more guilty." Shaking his head, Hollins leaned back in his chair, took out one of those thick dark cigars of his, and lit it. After his heart attack last year he gave up cigarettes, but not cigars. "I can't tell you how I came to know most of what I know. And I admit a bit of what I'm going to tell you is guessing. You can take my word, though—those two schleps are innocent."

Banner made his nervous chuckling sound. "If you really know

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something, Will, why don't you step forward and—"

"As I said, part of this is simply conjecture," said Hollins, puffing on the cigar. "Besides, I'm not like Heinz. I have to bust my hump to keep up with the deadlines on *Commuter Chuckles*. Getting involved in some strung-out court thing would mean—"

"The murder," prompted Zarley. "Tell us about that and the hell with your problems."

Hash Landon had a terrific knack for publicity (Hollins began). That's what made what happened happen. You may remember that in one week back in 1946 Hash was on the cover of *Life*, *Time*, *Coronet*, and *Pic*. That was when his strip, *Slaphappy Pappy*, was running in 600 newspapers domestically and that musical based on it had just opened on Broadway. Remember that? With Bert Lahr as Pappy and a guy named Eli Katz as Young Lunk. Damn play ran for three years and then they made the movie. Hash was really in tune with the 40s and, almost, with the 50s. In 1955 or thereabouts John Mason Brown wrote that piece and called him "the Mark Twain of the Funnies." The same month that thing ran, Hash was doing the sequence in the strip where Pappy and Lunk and Pearly Toot found the Magic Manure Mine. Not exactly Mark Twain stuff, but Hash dressed up in a white suit and a white wig and got himself three pages in *Look*. Posing, if you recall, with that girl who always wore the polka-dot bathing suits. And of course all through that period he ran the Swine Wrestling Pageant in the strip every year. College kids, who weren't so bright or dedicated in those days, took up the Swine Wrestling thing and had pageants all over the damn country. More publicity. Hell, they even held one in Japan, using a pig Hash personally airmailed to them. That got him into the MovieTone News, dressed like a Japanese wrestler. He had a terrific knack for publicity.

Another thing about Hash, which his poor pathetic nephews thought they could use to their advantage, was his refusal ever to use an assistant. You know most of the big guys had help then, but not Hash. He drew every single *Slaphappy Pappy* daily by himself and every darn Sunday. Pencilled, inked, and lettered. Wrote all his own scripts too. Once his original syndicate redrew a couple of panels, during that sequence where Pearly Toot got her backside caught in the bear trap, and Hash simply took the strip away from them and went over to

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Mamouth Features with it. He could do that, unlike most of us, because he owned *Slaphappy Pappy* outright.

Hash's first wife took off with that fashion photographer who used to have the studio on Main Street here in Westport. The guy liked skinny ladies, which Hash's wife certainly was. When Hash married again he managed to land on the front pages of every major paper in America except *The New York Times*, and even they wrote him up. He ran a Pearly Toot look-alike contest in the strip, then went and married the winner.

Well, most of you knew Donna. She looked exactly like Pearly, bosom and all, and had about as much in the brains department too, although she wasn't quite clumsy enough to catch her backside in a bear trap—maybe only because Hash didn't have a bear trap around that enormous mansion of his in Fairfield.

He bought the damn place for $200,000 back in 1948. It's worth at least a million and a half now, something his nephews were figuring on. The place looks like a blinking castle, has twenty acres of wooded land surrounding it—twenty acres in the middle of Fairfield. And right smack on the first floor, built to Hash's specifications, was his bathroom. I've never been in a bigger one. The bathtub was practically Olympic-pool size and every darn fixture was gold. Not gold-plated, solid gold. Even the biffy seat was gold. Hash was earning, oh, it's got to be a half million a year on *Slaphappy Pappy*. That was in his good years. Imagine what a half million in 1950 translates into today. He could afford a golden seat. Being Hash, he grabbed a ton of publicity from that bathroom.

Now as to his poor dimwitted nephews. I knew both of them, since Hash, for some obscure reason, was fond of me and we stayed pretty close over the years—most likely because I didn't pay any attention to his insults. I know I can't draw, and my wife is ugly but faithful, so there was nothing much Hash could rile me about. The nephews were Junior Bucklin, who's twenty-six now, and Freaky Phil Landon, who's got to be at least thirty-five. I recall being at his christening right before I went into the service. They didn't baptize him Freaky Phil, he acquired the name when he started hanging around the rock music crowd.

It was Phil's ambition to open a record shop, eventually a whole string of them. He designed a logo, even printed up stationery. The

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only other thing he needed was dough. Junior yearned after money also. He was a freelance writer, though up to the time he was put in jail he'd only managed to sell three short occult pieces to the *National Intruder*. I read one of them, about a housewife in Iowa who'd been intimate with a little green weirdo from a flying saucer. Junior hadn't inherited any of his uncle's writing ability.

You were probably never at Hash's when he had the nephews over. Once a month they were obliged to come by to collect their allowances. After Hash's second wife, poor Donna, was killed in that plane crash in the Bahamas, Junior and Freaky Phil were Hash's only living relatives. Not that he was in any way sentimental about them, he'd simply concluded it was a good idea to give them each a thousand a month to keep them out of the bigger sorts of trouble. The kind of publicity Hash didn't want—Hash Landon's two nitwit nephews arrested for armed robbery or drug-running or some other unsavory crime.

I was there about two months before the end. To my way of thinking, it was the very day Hash planted the seed that caused everything to happen.

"Saps," he was saying to the nephews when I wandered into his immense studio. Hash never locked up the mansion, and I could come in without ringing the bell if I wanted to. "Sit down, Will, I'll be through with these nitwits in a minute."

Despite what the obits claimed, Hash was actually seventy-two and not sixty-nine. He'd become even fatter in recent years, chiefly because he rarely moved out of that isolated mansion of his. Something like two years ago he'd taken a fall while climbing out of his huge bathtub and injured his left eye. It gave him a sinister squint, which didn't add any to his personableness. He looked something like Charles Laughton playing a pirate as he sat hunched over his drawing board glaring at Junior and Freaky Phil, and sounded more like that other actor, the one who played Long John Silver . . .

"Wallace Beery," suggested Banner.
"No, the British guy."
"Sir Wallace Beery," said Zarley.
"No, come on."
"Robert Newton," I said . . .

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He sounded something like a fat grouchy Robert Newton (continued Hollins, nodding at me). Hulking there with his pen clutched between his stubby fingers, telling his poor miserable nephews what idiots they were.

"Saps," Hash repeated. "How'd they melt, Philip?"

Freaky Phil was chubby like his uncle, and had a halfhearted beard. He sat in one of the straight chairs Hash always made his guests sit in. He was fidgeting, plump knees bouncing. "I guess I stacked them too close to the heater, Uncle Hash."

"Obviously. So you melted $5,000 worth of bunk rock."

"*Punk* rock," corrected Phil. "They were punk-rock record albums, Uncle Hash."

"Don't I know what's going on in the world, sap? I happen to be a satirist. Or weren't you aware?" He twisted slightly, caught Junior in his squinty gaze. "Tell me about your automobile, Junior."

Junior, though overweight, managed to give the impression of extreme frailty. His voice was thin, mostly got lost in his pug nose. "An accident, Uncle Hash. I mean, anyone might forget to leave the emergency brake on. I'm sure you've had similar—"

"On a steep hill overlooking Long Island Sound?" Hash swiveled and looked at me directly for the first time. "Will, have you ever left the brakes off a nearly new Pinto financed for you by a long-suffering uncle while said automobile was parked on a steep hill within spitting distance of the goddamn Sound?"

"I can't say I have, Hash, but some of these new cars do have a tendency—"

"Sure, everything's lousier than it used to be," Hash cut in. "The saps are taking over." He gestured at the far wall of his vast studio. Tacked up between the framed photos of Hash shaking hands with the greats of the past was a printout list of all the newspapers still carrying *Slaphappy Pappy*. "I lost sixteen more papers last month. Saps. What do they know about satire?"

"You ought to hire an assist—" began Junior.

"Sap, am I asking you for advice? A halfwit who can't even pull out an emergency brake?"

"I can't help, since I'm concerned about you, mentioning that you could boost your circulation again by maybe hiring a young assistant to help you with the drawing and the story lines—"

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"Two stories in the *National Intruder* and you're an expert on writing?"

"Three stories."

"That makes you, instead of a sap, an expert on what's funny?"

"A man your age, Uncle Hash," said Freaky Phil, "can't be expected to keep abreast of social and—"

"I'm enough in touch to earn more money in a month than either of you boobs have managed to make in a lifetime." With a snort Hash returned to inking in the *Slaphappy Pappy* Sunday page tacked to his board.

Ever since the eye injury, which he refused to have treated, he worked with his face about three inches from the paper. Which probably accounts for the squiggly appearance of his strip during its final phase.

The nephews sat watching him silently for a long moment. I pretended to be examining the row of trophies and scrolls along one wall of the studio. There wasn't an award dated later than 1967.

"Could we," Freaky Phil asked at last, "have our money now, Uncle? Because of all the accidents I'm really behind on my plans for opening my first record shop in the—"

"Sap," said Hash, not glancing up, "I'll give you a piece of free advice. See if you can retain it in that gourd you call a head. You'd better make a go of this junk-rock shop of yours." He swung around and pointed at Junior with the inky tip of his pen. "As for you, Sap Number Two, commence thinking about using that teaching credential it took you six years to earn at my expense."

Junior blinked.

Freaky Phil blinked.

"What do you mean?" asked Junior, paling.

"Things may change," warned Hash.

"Change?" said Phil. "How change?"

Hash took two envelopes from an inside pocket of the old maroon smoking jacket he wore while working. They were used envelopes. Hash didn't believe in wasting anything. "Things can change, saps." He tossed the two envelopes full of money at them.

The envelopes landed on the rug and Junior popped out of his chair to scoop them up. He passed one to his cousin, saying, "Well, thank you, Uncle Hash. Take care of yourself."

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Phil stood up slowly. "What do you mean, exactly, about—"

"Forget it, chump," advised Hash. "You haven't sufficient brains in that honey bucket between your shoulders to figure it out."

"I do think we have the right to know if you're planning to make some sort of—"

"Go," Hash suggested. "I've got to finish this page for my eager sap public. I haven't missed a deadline in twenty-nine years, and you two goofs aren't going to make me do it now of all times."

Junior attempted a question. "Uncle, haven't you been feeling well late—"

"I feel as well as can be expected," Hash told him, his crusty voice rising. "Except for a pronounced allergy to saps, I'm tiptop."

With furtive nods at me, the two nephews left the studio.

I'm certain that was when they decided to murder Hash.

"You started off claiming they didn't do it," remarked Banner, who had ordered another martini.

"No, they didn't murder him," said Hollins. "But that doesn't mean they didn't plan to."

Immediately after they left Hash's mansion (Hollins went on) Junior and Freaky Phil drove to a bar in Bridgeport. They used Phil's car, because of what had happened to Junior's.

Phil sat in the shadowy booth, fretting, moving his wide rear end to and fro on the wooden bench. "You really think that's what he meant?"

"What else?" Junior sat very straight and still, both hands circling his bottle of ale. "Things are going to change. What else could it mean? He intends to stop our allowances."

"How do you like that?" said Phil. "Right when things are starting to look up for me. I'm getting some very favorable reactions from people and if most of my stock hadn't melted I'd be—"

"You know what else I'm afraid of?"

"More?"

"The will," whispered Junior.

"You mean he's considering changing it?" Phil shook his head. "He can't, we're his only relatives."

"Remember the last time he was mad at us? When you thought that girl gymnast you were living with was pregnant again? Uncle Hash

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made some very obvious hints about leaving all his money to Mort Walker's cartoon museum."

"Geeze, all that money going to preserve a bunch of dumb drawings. It must be a couple of million Uncle Hash's got stashed away."

"Closer to three million," said Junior with conviction. "He told us Walker'd promised to put in a special Slaphappy Pappy Room, to hold all his originals and trophies and those damn photos of him shaking hands with everybody from Mahatma Gandhi to Ella Fitzgerald."

"If only Uncle hadn't lost his knack for getting publicity," sighed Phil. "A nice spread in *People* about now might help the strip, boost the flagging circulation."

"Nope," said Junior with a shake of his head. "Nothing can save *Slaphappy Pappy*—not so long as he's doing it. When I had lunch at the Inkwell a few months ago they were saying there are a couple of very good cartoonists available, young guys who could ghost the strip, make it look as good as it did in the 1940s before Uncle Hash got senile and went blind."

"Drawing it is one thing, but you also have to have good strong scripts." Freaky Phil shook his head. "He's out of touch, he doesn't realize that people these days, after Vietnam and Watergate, simply aren't as amused by manure as they were twenty years ago."

Junior announced, "I can write it."

Phil studied his cousin. "You know, I bet you could. You wrote me some damn funny letters while I was in the service, and you were only a kid then. Sure, you'd do a marvelous job of bringing *Slaphappy Pappy* up to date. Except he'd never let you touch it."

Junior took a deep breath. "Suppose Uncle Hash couldn't stop me? Suppose he died?"

"That would be handy," admitted Freaky Phil. "If he died right about now, before he got a chance to stop our allowances or cut us out of his will, it would be very nice. We'd inherit his three million and the house as well."

"Not only that, we'd control the comic strip too. He owns *Slaphappy Pappy* outright, so it would become ours. I'd hire a bright young ghost for a few hundred bucks a week and do the writing myself. I've got some good ideas for satirical continuities I've never dared bring to him—he'd only call me a sap."

"He's a tough old bird," said Phil ruefully. "He could live another

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ten years. Lots of cartoonists live to ripe old ages. Uncle Hash is stubborn and spiteful enough to do it just to keep us from coming into our own."

Junior leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, and said to his cousin, "He might have an accident."

"Hell, the last accident he had made him even nastier than before. Not only that, it made his artwork look god-awful. One more accident like that and *Slaphappy Pappy* will really dive."

"The other accident," said Junior slowly and carefully, "was an accident."

"All accidents are. What are you—"

"We might arrange one," explained Junior. "When you control an accident, you can make sure of the results."

Freaky Phil stared. "You're suggesting—hinting—well, it amounts to murder."

"They call it murder only if they tumble to you," said Junior. "Contemplate the situation. We have an old man with noticeably terrible eyesight. All the cops'd have to do to establish that fact is scan a few days of *Slaphappy Pappy*. O.K., we have this old man with lousy eyesight who lives absolutely alone in a big rambling mansion. He's so feisty he won't even have servants around. He won't allow an assistant to so much as touch his strip, even though his stubbornness is causing one of the most valuable comic properties in the nation to go down the drain. No servants, no assistants, few friends. Uncle Hash, he of the poor vision, abiding all alone in the house and famed for loving to take long leisurely baths in his celebrated solid gold bathroom. See?"

Freaky Phil swallowed once, twice, and again. "Yeah, but—"

"Phil, you can't go through your whole damn life being a 'Yeah, but' man," his cousin said. "If Uncle Hash had been anything like decent to us we'd be a heck of a lot higher on the ladder than we are. I'd have a couple best sellers to my credit and you'd own a chain of record shops from coast to coast."

Phil nodded. "You're absolutely right, Junior."

It was a drizzly evening when they put their plan into operation. What they had worked out was simple enough. Making themselves fairly obvious, they bought tickets to a movie in Westport and went in. Once the film began, something with Gene Wilder I think, they slip-

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ped out a fire exit and took off in Phil's car. They'd both read the reviews in case anyone later asked them what the movie had been about. Not that they were expecting anyone to ask. They were sure they could get rid of their uncle and come away clean.

Behind the estate ran an old and infrequently used road. Perfect for their plan. They parked there, off the road and sheltered by white maples, and moved on foot down through the woodlands which made up most of Hash's acreage. Freaky Phil, who hadn't been in the woods since he was asked to leave the Boy Scouts, fell down. He hit in a fairly mushy patch of ground and became fairly well spattered with mud.

"Damn it," muttered Junior as he pulled him up. "We can't afford to track slush all over the house."

"It's O.K.," insisted Freaky Phil, "it's all right. I'll clean myself off." Using his handkerchief, he swiped away most of the mud.

As you know if you ever visited Hash, he never locked up the mansion. In the old days cartoonists, writers, artists, and all sorts of newspaper people were always dropping in unannounced. Nowadays, though, he rarely had a visitor. The cousins circled the mansion, hunched low, making certain there was no company tonight. The wide horseshoe drive was empty of cars. Nothing but silence came from inside.

They let themselves in through the unlocked back door.

"Footprints," whispered Junior angrily.

"Hum?"

Junior pointed at the muddy marks his heavyset cousin had produced on Hash's expensive Oriental carpet. "I thought you got all the mud off."

"O.K., so I missed a spot." Phil started to kneel down.

"Not now," cautioned Junior. "We'll take care of it afterwards. Just get your shoe and come on."

Silently the cousins approached the studio. Junior had procured, by strolling unobserved into a junkyard, a chunk of pipe. All they had to do was conk Hash while he sat over the drawing board. Then they'd undress him, run a bath, and toss him into his mammoth tub and hold him under until it was quite certain he was completely dead and gone. After that they'd arrange a few things to make it look like an accident. Then they'd depart, drive back to Westport, and sneak back into the

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movie theater by way of the side door. Phil had left—or was pretty sure he had—a match in the doorjamb.

Hash wasn't in his studio. The familiar gooseneck lamp snaked over the board, illuminating a half finished and fuzzily drawn *Slaphappy Pappy*.

"Listen," said Junior.

"What?"

"Water running."

Water was indeed running in the immense bathroom that adjoined the studio.

"Great," whispered Junior.

"We won't even have to undress him, probably. That's the part I've been worrying about—"

"Let's go." Junior, taking out the hunk of pipe, tiptoed toward the nearly closed door of the bathroom.

He intended to halt on the threshold and peek into the room. After studying his target, the back of the old man's head, he'd rush in and smack him. Instead, he slipped on the wet floor, stumbled, and skidded into the tile bathroom.

The floor was covered with water.

The tub had long since run over.

Hash, it seems, had stepped into the tub, tripped, and toppled straight into it, cracking his skull. He'd drowned about ten minutes before the nephews arrived.

Junior noticed this as soon as he managed to skate up off the slippery tiles. "He's already dead," he said.

"He is?" Phil looked in from the studio.

"What a break, what an incredible lucky break!" Junior laughed. "He's dead, we inherit everything! And we didn't even have to murder him!"

The doorbell rang.

"Geeze," said Phil.

"See who it is."

"Answering the door at a time like—"

"You can see the porch from the front window," said Junior. "Be careful, but find out."

Freaky Phil cautiously crossed the studio and put an eye to the break in the drapes.

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What he saw was ten automobiles and three vans parked or parking in the curving drive. There were reporters from CBS, NBC, and ABC, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *The National Intruder*, *Time*, *New Times*, and *The Boston Globe*.

What Freaky Phil and Junior didn't know, and couldn't have known since Hash never made a habit of confiding in them, was that he had announced that morning that he was retiring. He and *Slaphappy Pappy* were going to retire together, which was the change he'd hinted at to them. That announcement made Hash Landon, for one last time, newsworthy.

The media arrived while Junior and Phil were still in the house. Junior was sopping wet, carrying a hunk of pipe, and Phil's footprints were all over the back hall. They might have been able to sneak away, except some of the older reporters knew about Hash's habit of never locking his doors. When no one opened the door to the bell, they let themselves in and came trooping into the studio.

Junior and Phil couldn't have been expected to anticipate that, although they probably should have paid closer attention to their uncle's habits. They should have realized a guy like Hash never quite loses his knack for publicity.

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There are times when fire must be fought with fire . . .

THE CRIME OF SCOUNDRELS

by MARJORIE RIDDELL

Richard Blackwood didn't telephone Mrs. Chalfont to make an appointment, or even to tell her he was coming. It would, he reasoned, be to his advantage if he caught her by surprise—without warning.

Consequently, when he arrived little Mrs. Chalfont was in her front garden, innocently cutting roses.

"I think I'd like two of you," she said to a bush of dark red blooms. "You'll go very well with the other pink shades. And one of

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you big white ones. Just one, and I'll put you near the side of the bowl."

It was quite a good-sized front garden and well stocked, though this was not because Mrs. Chalfont was a knowledgeable gardener. In fact, she didn't even know the names of the roses she was picking. But the soil was good, and Mrs. Chalfont had green fingers. And understanding—a feeling.

Mr. Blackwood opened the front gate, raised his hat, and said, "Mrs. Chalfont?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Richard Blackwood."

She stood quite still.

"I thought I would come to see you, since you have ignored both my letters. Shall we go inside?"

She said, "I never understood how you found me."

He repeated, "Shall we go inside?"

She glanced around quickly. It probably would be better to go inside. In this row of fairly affluent houses in suburban London, who could say which curtains were twitching and whose eyes and ears were pressed against which windows?

She led the way into the pseudo-Tudor house that was almost exactly like its neighbors (even to the Tudor garage—what a surprise for Henry VIII) and closed the front door behind them.

She took his hat and gloves and set them on the hall table. She held out her hand for his briefcase, but he shook his head, smiling, then followed her into the sitting-room at the end of the hall. There, French windows opened onto a large rear garden.

"It's quite absurd of me," she said brightly, "to pick roses from the front when I have so many at the back, but I wanted those particular colors. I shall put them here, you see." She laid the roses by the side of a crystal bowl, empty at present, that was placed on an exquisite marquetry table in the corner.

"How *did* you find me?" she asked. "Oh, forgive me—please sit down. May offer you a drink?"

"Thank you. Scotch, if you have it."

For the first time, it was apparent that she was a little flustered.

"I'm so sorry. I have only sherry. Except at Christmas, you know. I have some very good sweet sherry. Or perhaps you would prefer dry?"

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"Dry, thank you."

He accepted the glass she gave him and did not sit down until she had carried her own glass of sweet sherry to one of the deep chintz-covered armchairs and seated herself. Her hand shook slightly as she sipped.

It was a plump little hand, and she was a plump little woman—far from fat, just pleasantly rounded. She barely verged on middle-age, and was attractive, pretty, with rather ruffled brown hair and a small snub nose.

His sherry was medium, not dry, and he found it unpleasant. He had difficulty in controlling his facial muscles as he tasted it. It crossed his mind that he was fortunate not to have had a cherry popped into it by this ridiculous little woman.

He said, "I traced you through an inquiry agent. I am a lawyer, as you know, and I found the kind of agent I wanted quite easily. He is entirely reliable."

"I see." But she didn't entirely. "Would you tell me why?"

He smiled again. He was a tall man, with greying hair, a strong, rather beaky nose, and a thin mouth. "The agent made some tape recordings for me."

He paused, watching her.

She set down her glass. Her hand was now shaking quite noticeably.

"Tape recordings?" she repeated.

He wondered what men could see in her. And yet more than one had been drawn to her. He was not himself attracted to the little homebody type. He was not able to understand how a man who had a beautiful, impeccably groomed wife could prefer comfort and quietness.

He opened his briefcase and brought out some papers. He glanced at them, laid them down, and looked up at her. "You have been married twice, have you not, Mrs. Chalfont?"

She clasped her hands together. "Yes."

"And widowed twice?"

"Yes, but—"

"My agent is very thorough. Both were quite normal deaths. Cancer still seems to be considered normal by some doctors. And the witnesses who saw your second husband's car crash were impeccable."

"Please tell me what you—"

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His thin smile silenced her. "But there have been other men—ah—concerned with you since the death of your second husband, have there not, Mrs. Chalfont?"

He watched her, still smiling, then consulted his papers again. "Gordon Talley? Does that name mean anything to you? Paul Graveney? Henry Holland?"

She didn't answer.

"Oh, come," he said. "I can understand. I'm a man of the world, Mrs. Chalfont. You are receiving only comparatively small incomes from the endowment policies of your two husbands. And even though this house is fully paid for, your overhead must be considerable. A little help must not have come amiss."

Mrs. Chalfont gripped the arms of her chair. "What do you want?"

He spread his thin hands. "You must have guessed from my letters."

"Your letters were vague—"

"Oh, really, you disappoint me. I am a lawyer. What else would I be, in writing, but vague? And yet you should have guessed."

She shook her head—lying, and knowing he knew she was lying.

"And now—" he took a small machine from his briefcase "—I'll play the tape recordings."

"You keep saying tape recordings." She heard her voice unnaturally high. "How could you have any tape recordings?"

He gazed at her in mock sadness. "Oh, my dear Mrs. Chalfont." He set a cassette in the machine.

She leaned back, fell back, as he worked at the buttons.

Less than halfway through, she cried, "Stop! Stop it! Stop it!"

He pressed a button.

"Enough?"

She was panting. "Please—"

"Enough?"

"Yes."

"Well; now, Mrs. Chalfont, I'm not an unreasonable man. I'm not greedy. But you will understand that should the contents of these tapes become known, your life in this very respectable neighborhood would become impossible."

"You wouldn't dare. The police—"

He laughed. "The police!" He laughed again. "You would be ruined. Oh, certainly, so would your friends, of course. But what about you?

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Could you stand it? And where would you go? Where could my agent not find you, and make it all public again?"

"What do you want?"

He named a sum. It was high.

"No!" she gasped. "I can't—"

"Yes, you can. I have worked out exactly what you can afford. The sum is precisely right. Your friends help you financially, do they not? May I get you some more sherry?"

She was very pale. And although her glass was not yet empty, he carried it to the sideboard and brought it back refilled.

"Drink it, do. I fear I have given you a shock. Dear little Mrs. Chalfont, one can understand your—shall we say?—way of life. To some extent. In your position—" She didn't touch the sherry.

"Of course," he went on, "if you should ever change your arrangements with your friends, I shall have to think again. But in the meantime—"

He became brisk. "Now, shall we call it settled? Every month? In cash, please." He handed her a piece of paper. "Send it to this box number." He put the recording equipment and papers back into his briefcase. "Except for this month's installment. Your bank is still open. We must settle this month's installment now."

She went with him to the bank.

Later that evening in a private room he had hired at a nearby pub, Mr. Blackwood sat with Gordon Talley, Paul Graveney, and Henry Holland.

Mr. Blackwood had just finished a description of his conversation with Mrs. Chalfont. And with the exception of himself, they all wore an expression of shock.

"You seem surprised," Mr. Blackwood said, "that I should know so much about you. But as I told Mrs. Chalfont, I have a good agent. And naturally his inquiries led not only to you, but to certain incidents in your lives."

He continued, "Perhaps you will be reassured to know that I am, in fact, one of you. In short, I too was being blackmailed by our dear little Mrs. Chalfont. And in the case of each of us, the offense was against the law. I know the details concerning each of you, but it shall go no further. My own—ah—mistake was to borrow from the trust

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fund of a client. I have made full restitution, but that would not help me as a lawyer.

"All of you, for your various mistakes, have made full restitution, but that would not save you from persecution and publicity. And so you could not, any more than I, invite police action against Mrs. Chalfont.

"I have suggested to her that she might change her way of life—and we shall see. In the meantime, however, you must continue to pay her—and she will pay me the total. I shall reimburse each of us. I have this month's installment with me. Shall I begin the reimbursement, gentlemen?"

He raised his glass. "To the blackmailed—and the blackmailer!"

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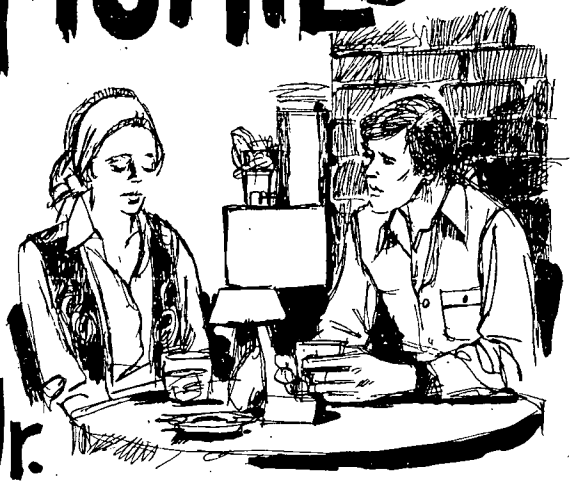
She was Ms. Right, as far as Cogan was concerned . . .

DOOMCHILD

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.



After my third week on the run and my fifth day in Indianapolis, I had passed beyond the initial excitement of staying a few jumps ahead of the hit man and was growing tired of being hunted. My life had degenerated into a series of hops from city to city and hotel to hotel, name changes once or twice a week, and too many skittish glances over my shoulder.

It was no way for a moderately successful con man to exist, and what

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made things worse was that I was fast approaching the bottom of the stack of credit cards in the names of imaginary gentlemen that I was using to square my bills while I was on the run. No one knew where I was and not even I knew where I'd go next or when.

Which was why the ringing of the bedside phone in my airport hotel room scared the starch out of me that Sunday evening.

I told panic to get lost and fought to recall what my current name was. Houston, that was it—James Houston. I snatched the handset between rings and held the mouthpiece to my trembling lips. "Houston," I quavered manfully.

"Milo, it's Roy Cogan." The shock of hearing my own name hit me as hard as the shock of hearing my once-and-future scam partner's voice, which sounded as uptight as my own. "I'm downstairs. I've got to see you right away. I'm in the worst mess of my life."

Welcome to the club, buddy, I felt like telling him. Instead, remembering the contract out on me, I played it cagey, cleared my throat, and said: "You have the wrong room, sir. My name is James Houston. From Normal, Illinois."

"I'll be up in two minutes," Cogan replied and hung up.

I had last seen Cogan at Los Angeles International Airport after a scam in St. Louis had turned into a shambles. He'd started out as an actor before drifting into bunco, and I remembered him as tall and lanky with thick dark hair flecked with grey and a luxuriant moustache that gave him a vaguely Greek appearance. I hadn't heard much about him in the two years since we'd split, but there had been rumors that he'd made connections with the violent side of crime. And suddenly the spine-snapping thought assailed me: What if he'd metamorphosed from con man into hit man?

When his knock came I was standing to one side of the door with a Colt Python ready in my hand. "It's open," I called out, and as he crossed the threshold I poked the barrel into the small of his back and kicked the door shut behind me. "Frisk time," I said. "Assume the usual position."

After a brisk patdown convinced me he was clean, I told him to turn around and sit on the floor facing me. He'd changed his looks as best he could with the help of a barber, tinted contact lenses, and some hair dye, but it was Cogan. His facial color was slowly turning back to a human shade but the look in his eyes made me think of a soldier trap-

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ped in the middle of a minefield. Actor though he was, his fear was real, and I was satisfied he hadn't been sent by the Vegetables.

I pointed to the bottle next to the plastic ice bucket on the dresser top. "Help yourself to the Haig & Haig," I invited. "But before you start spilling your troubles, tell me how you found me."

"I saw Jock in L.A. this morning," Cogan said after a long pull at the scotch. "I had to give him the whole story before he'd tell me where you were."

Jock Schultz was the genial proprietor of the world's only human supermarket. He had an uncanny skill for matching any con man or maid with any other person necessary for a scam. But not even Jock was clairvoyant. Whoever told him I was at the airport hotel in Indianapolis and calling myself James Houston might have told any number of other people. It was time to make dust before the Vegetables' hit man heard the word.

I had been working a game to liberate some loot from Leafy Green Vegetables, the rock group and also the third largest organization of hard-drug dealers on the West Coast. The scam had fallen through, but the Vegetables, acting on the old adage that revenge is the best way of getting even, had put out a contract on me.

"Can I tell you my tale of woe now?" Cogan all but begged me. He coughed as the second belt of scotch sloshed through his pipes.

I gave the pistol barrel a lazy wiggle in his direction. "Just as long as you stay on the floor," I told him. "Too much caution never killed a man—Milo's Maxim Number Thirty-six."

I've been living in Greenwich Village the past year [he began], trying to make another go of it as an actor. I landed a few TV commercials and Off-Broadway parts, nothing much, but two months ago I snagged a role in a major production that was due to open in the fall.

And a couple of weeks after that professional break I got a personal one to go with it. I met Robin Pierce.

I met her at a session of this acting group I'd joined. She was tall and fantastically beautiful, with hair the color of caramel candy. We were sitting next to each other, watching some people in the group do an improvisation, and we started chatting. A couple of hours later we were sharing a bottle of red wine in a Village bar, and a couple of hours after that—well, enough said.

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The weekend after we met was nonstop rain. We spent two days and three nights in her apartment, which was a little studio on East 54th Street. I'd never known a woman who was so loving and open. Her father is Thurman W. Pierce, the president of Pierce Electronics in Albany, but she'd left home three years before when the old man tried to stop her from going into the theater. She'd been supporting herself with secretarial work and whatever acting jobs she could, always hoping for the one big break.

She had an older brother, Emmett, but she didn't get along with him either. He was a junior executive with a New York branch of the family business, and the only thing he cared about was the company.

She was a pensive moody woman, and she seemed to expect the world to fall in on her any minute. A doomchild was how she described herself. She had only a handful of friends and no relatives in the city except Emmett.

I wanted her not just for a weekend but long range. She was Ms. Right—and knowing she was also Ms. Rich, or at least that she would be when the old man kicked off, didn't make her any less desirable as far as I was concerned.

There was another guy in her life she told me about. His name was Tony McDonald and he was a young lawyer working in a Wall Street firm. He was superstraight, with a Phi Beta Kappa key and a different vested suit for every day of the week, and he was crazy to marry her and take her away from all those grubby theater people and back to the money world she'd grown up in. She didn't really know how to get rid of him, but she knew he wasn't what she wanted.

I didn't tell her about the time I'd spent working scams, but just made it seem as if I'd been drifting for years from one meaningless job to another to support my acting. But she found out anyway. I still don't know how. She probably told McDonald a little about me and he'd had me checked out. Three weeks ago yesterday she told me what she knew. There'd been a Saturday-morning rehearsal, and afterwards I went to her apartment for lunch. She sat down with me and let me have it.

In a quiet brooding way she was badly hurt—not by the fact that I'd been a con artist but because I hadn't trusted her enough to tell her. I don't know how many times I tried to apologize but I just couldn't get through to her. She said she didn't know what she wanted any more

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but asked me not to call or see her for a couple of weeks. I left the apartment and spent the rest of the afternoon in bars.

Around six o'clock I remembered I had an invitation to a party that night that one of the couples backing the play I was rehearsing was giving at their apartment on West 87th Street. So I cabbed downtown to my place in the Village, showered, and changed, and downed enough black coffee to get me half sober again. Then I grabbed a cab to Broadway and 87th.

The Moultons, the couple who was throwing the party, had an apartment in a glass-and-enameled-steel high rise a block and a half east of the Broadway intersection. Apartment 10-D. I remember checking my watch as I walked east on 87th. It was a few minutes past nine. The evening was cool and the walk felt good.

Three other couples in party clothes happened to be going into the building as I got there. I didn't know them, but we all went up in the elevator and down the corridor together. The Moultons had said theirs was the last door on the left. The door was wide open and people and music were spilling out into the hall.

The whole apartment was packed. Three or four waiters in white jackets inched through the crowd trying to balance drink trays. The noise and cigarette smoke on top of all the booze I'd had earlier made me feel sick. I kept looking around for someone from the show I could talk to. And then, in a corner of the front room, I saw this young woman. She was standing next to the open window, desperately trying to get some air. She looked lost. She was a very short and slender girl with a dark complexion, her brown hair cut boyishly. I was feeling lost myself, so I fought my way over to her, told her my name, and asked for hers.

"It's Lona," she said.

There was something about her that reminded me a little of Robin. A sense that here was another one born to trouble, a doomchild. We exchanged some small talk, and after a few minutes I put my hand on her shoulder. She was wearing a silvery pantsuit. She smiled up at me in a distracted sort of way when I touched her, and I suggested that maybe we should cut out of this mob and find ourselves a quiet place.

"Oh, yes," she said and squeezed my hand with something like desperation. She set her glass down on the windowsill. "Let's not even stop to say thanks."

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"I couldn't find our hosts if someone paid me," I said.

We made our way out and down in the elevator to the street and found an intimate little lounge a few blocks away. Afterwards we took a taxi down to the Village, to my place.

We'd both had just enough to drink so that the night was like a dream, like something happening to two other people. Lona was different from Robin in one way—she wasn't a talker. The only thing I really learned about her was that she was married to a guy who beat her up regularly and that a few weeks ago she'd finally walked out. She made me keep all the lights out in the bedroom because she didn't want me to see the marks her husband had left on her. She never even told me her last name.

When I woke on Sunday morning she was gone. There was a sheet from my desk pad lying on her pillow, and the note was just five words long: "Thanks forever, my gentle darling. L." Except for the note the whole night could have been a wild dream.

And then half an hour later the dream turned into a nightmare. Two cops knocked on my door about ten, right after I'd stepped out of the shower—a fat one, who said he was Detective Sergeant Lemke and a tough Puerto Rican whose name was Cruz.

"You know a Miss Robin Pierce, 264 East 54th?"

"Sure, I know her. What's the matter?"

"She's dead," Lemke told me. "She was found in her apartment, stabbed five times with a carving knife from her own kitchen. She died sometime between eleven last night and one this morning."

I fell onto the nearest chair.

"And your prints are all over her apartment, Mr. Cogan. Would you mind telling us where you were between eleven and one?"

That smooth menacing voice got through to me, and made me damn glad I'd had company at the Moulton party and afterward. I told them all about Lona, everything I knew, and even showed them the sheet of notepaper she'd left on the pillow.

"A sheet of your own paper, a note written with your own pen, from a girl you slept with but whose last name you don't know." Sergeant Lemke wrote it all down dutifully. "All right, Mr. Cogan, let's get dressed and pay a visit on your friends, the Moultons."

During the ride uptown, Cruz told me a little more about what had happened. It was her brother Emmett who'd found Robin. Apparently

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she'd called him yesterday afternoon when I'd left her place and had told him about her scene with me. He'd made a date to pick her up at eight-thirty this morning and take her out to breakfast. When he got there he'd found her door unlocked and discovered her body.

So that was how the cops knew about my record, and the argument I'd had with Robin. I could see how they'd tag me as the number one suspect. But I wasn't really frightened yet, because I knew I hadn't killed her, and because I thought I could get hold of Lona through the Moultons.

Lemke pulled the police car into the driveway in front of the high-rise entrance. Cruz stayed in the car and Lemke went in with me. "10-D," he told the doorman. "Moulton. Police business." He pressed the 10 button inside the elevator and we went up. Henry and Barbara were both in, lounging around with the Sunday *Times*. The place was an impossible mess after last night's party—glasses and cigarette butts everywhere and a thick smoky pall still hanging in the air.

By the time Lemke finished talking with them, I had hit the panic button, and hard.

"I'm sorry, officer," Henry said, "I don't know any woman by that name and we certainly didn't invite her to the party. And I don't recall seeing Mr. Cogan here last night. Barb or I would have seen him and this Lona person if they'd been here—one of us was behind the bar virtually all evening, isn't that right, darling?"

"Yes, it is, dear."

Lemke turned his shrewd eyes towards me. "Didn't you tell us there were three or four waiters serving drinks on trays, Mr. Cogan?"

"Absolutely!" I said.

Barbara Moulton looked at me with a theatrical sadness in her eyes, as if she'd just realized that someone she knew was hopelessly insane. "We didn't hire any waiters for last night's affair," she said. "Our guests either helped themselves or Henry or I served them."

"Thank you, ma'am. Thank you, sir," Lemke said, and wrapped his arm around my elbow. "Let's go, Cogan."

That was when I chopped him in the midsection as hard as I could, and flew out of the apartment on the run. I took the firestairs to the roof, jumped across to the roof of another wing of the building, got back to the street, and maneuvered my way through alleys, where I lost my pursuers.

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I couldn't go back to my apartment, so I went underground. A couple of old buddies helped me stay under cover, and last week I changed my appearance as much as I could and caught a plane to L.A. Although the New York papers didn't give the story too much play, they printed a photograph of me, so I stayed holed up till this morning, when I talked to Jock.

That, Milo, is how I got into this fix. I didn't kill Robin—I never saw her again after our argument Saturday—but someone's framed me so beautifully no one in his right mind will believe my story. If our old partnership means anything to you, I want you to play sleuth again for me. I need you!

I could feel his pitch coming a mile off, and while one part of the Turner cerebrum was absorbing his story another part was futzing around with an inspiration even crazier than Cogan's tale. After he'd finished his spiel and was helping himself to another jolt of Haig & Haig I did some mental mastication, studying him carefully as I thought.

Did I want to bail him out? Not particularly—but then again we had been partners once. Could I further my own interests by trying to unframe him? The more I played with the notion, the more appealing it grew. It was a gorgeous puzzler. If Cogan was telling the truth, how could any human power have manipulated him into such an impossible situation? But if he was lying, why tell lies that no one outside the looneybin would believe?

As I mulled over the Moulton testimony that had sent him on the run—namely, that neither he nor anyone corresponding to his description of Lona nor any waiters had been at their party—a glimmering of hypothesis smacked me between the eyes.

"O.K.," I told Cogan, "I'll take your case. But you're not going to like my fee."

"I've still got a bunch of cash socked away—" he began.

"That will take care of my expenses," I cut in. "You are going to sit here in Indianapolis, take over this room and my James Houston identity, and play target for the Leafy Green Vegetables' hit man while I'm in New York getting you unstuck. Is it a deal?"

The proposition didn't turn him delirious with joy. He drew his knees up and squeezed his eyes half shut and shook his head from side

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to side like a boxer trying to recover from an opponent's haymaker. But he didn't really have much choice, and after a couple of minutes' thought he knew it. He opened his eyes and held out his hand. "Deal," he said.

And so it was that I packed my bag and slipped out of the hotel, leaving my newly discovered doppelgänger behind, and caught a night flight to La Guardia, paying for the ticket with a Visa card in the name of Mr. Allen Moffett of Watkins Glen, New York. I limoed into Manhattan, checked into an inconspicuous hotel north of Times Square, and shut down the cerebration factory for the night.

The first thing any master detective needs is a legman, which is why my first Monday-morning chore was a leisurely tour through the Investigators listed in the Yellow Pages. One entry that read "Masaryk J 220 E 65" revived old memories. Three years ago, while researching a scam that hadn't materialized, I had had occasion to disguise my classically handsome features and hire a Manhattan eyeball to get some answers for me. The fellow I'd retained had been a bullet-headed Czech refugee named Josef Masaryk, who ran a small agency in the East Sixties. He spoke mangled English and smoked like a sturgeon, but he knew his job and, more important, he didn't know me except in that ancient disguise. I called his office for an appointment and was invited to come in that afternoon.

At a few minutes short of four I stepped into the dreary office building on 65th that housed the peeper from Prague, and three quarters of an hour later, having heard my marvelous tale, Josef Masaryk beamed as he stuffed my $200 retainer in his wallet. "I vill be pleased to inwestigate, Professor Wincent," he purred, stubbing out the ninth cigarette of our interview in an old china sugar bowl.

With all the proper hemmings and hesitations I had permitted him to coax out of me, in my guise as Professor Gordon Vincent of the University of Minnesota, the information that I had been nurturing a passionate liaison with the late Robin Pierce over the past three years, visiting her whenever a conference I could plausibly use as an excuse had been held in the city. I expressed grief and horror about reading in *The Times* of her brutal stabbing, but I said that the published account had not convinced me of the guilt of the man the police were hunting for the murder.

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"I have good connections with the police," Masaryk said. "Come again Thursday, four o'clock is good time. I have first report for you then. On vat the police are doing, on the actor Mr. Cogan, and on the dead girl's brother, Emmett Pierce."

"Don't forget the other man," I reminded him in my best jealous undertone. "Anthony McDonald, the Wall Street lawyer."

"I do not forget things I am paid to remember," Masaryk said. "Four o'clock Thursday, yes?"

I checked my watch as I left Masaryk's building, and decided it was time to pay a discreet call on the East Coast's foremost purveyor of phony credentials. When I left that gentleman's abode it was 8:00 P.M. and I was Detective Sergeant Burdett of the NYPD whenever I chose to be.

It was too late to get theater tickets, so I took a cab uptown to Broadway and 87th. I walked a block and a half east to the high rise where Cogan had been an unseen guest and picked up an invisible woman. The young Hispanic doorman let me into the lobby after I flashed my black-leather badge case at him. The house directory listed the Moultons all right, but knowing their version of the events already I didn't bother to buzz them. Instead I followed my hypothesis and pressed the button for Apartment H-D.

No response. I kept my finger on the button.

"Buzz all night, *hermano*," the doorman said with a touch of amusement. "You won't get no answer. The Johnstons have been on a cruise for the past six weeks. They don't get back until a week from Sunday."

I released the button and moved my finger to the 9-D button, next to which there was a name plate that read DR. & MRS. G. W. SEDLER. Again nothing, not a peep out of the place. "They're gone too," the doorman said. "Some medical convention, I think. They come back Thursday evening."

Which meant I would spend the next few days waiting. I thanked the kid and stalked coplike into the night.

Tuesday was the first time in almost a month that I didn't feel like a six-point buck during open season. I browsed in bookstores and art galleries and ogled the women walking along Madison and Fifth, secure in the knowledge that Cogan was staked out back in Indianapolis like a

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sacrificial goat. After dinner Tuesday evening I put a call to his room in the airport hotel and found him unscathed.

"Nothing's happened," he reported. "No sign of a hostile force. How are you doing with my little problem?"

"The wheels are turning," I assured him. "Rest easy."

"Milo," he said, "I may have an idea how to get this hit man off your back permanently. It'll cost you some bread, though. Want me to try it? I'll pay the freight if it doesn't work out."

"Sounds reasonable," I conceded. "What's the brainstorm?"

"The wheels are turning," he assured me.

Wednesday and most of Thursday were leisurely days, which I spent patronizing various movie houses, bars, and expensive eating places on Cogan's money. Every so often I felt a vague twinge, as if I were overlooking some crucial part of the case, but I put it down to residual scruples over taking Cogan's cash and laying his neck on the line. I did call him in Indianapolis every twelve hours, but each time the message was the same: nothing happening.

Late Thursday afternoon, back in Masaryk's office, I skimmed the neatly typed sheaf of material he had ready for me, all stapled into a manila folder except for three photographs that slid around loosely. The shot of Cogan, obviously a posed studio job, made him look even more handsome than the three-dimensional version.

The one labeled "McDonald, Anthony" looked like a blowup from a law school yearbook picture and showed a painfully thin serious face, the mouth corners turned down, the eyes squinting myopically. No wonder the late Robin Pierce had preferred Cogan.

The third shot, Robin's older brother Emmett, was a candid photo that one of Masaryk's part-time help had taken on the street in front of the Manhattan branch of Pierce Electronics. The brother was short but well built, with trimly cut light hair receding drastically up the middle and a tiny moustache. He wore a vested suit that looked extravagant even in this unprofessional snapshot. I put them in my wallet when I'd finished studying them.

"On these facts," I said to Masaryk, "either man could have killed Robin. Her brother claims to have spent that Saturday evening at home watching television, and the people in the apartment directly below him confirm that they heard the TV from his place until after

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1:00 A.M. But of course he could have kept the set on for that very reason while he was out killing his sister."

"McDonald," I continued, "was at a Bar Association cocktail party, but can't prove whether he left early or late, and either way he could have had time to kill Robin on his way home. The police haven't found any witnesses who saw anyone enter or leave Robin's building between eleven and one. Jealousy gives McDonald a motive, and this report indicates a strong money motive for Emmett."

"The vill of Thurman Pierce is most clear," Masaryk said. "The property in question goes to his son and his daughter or to the survivor if either should die before the father. And Thurman Pierce is seventy-three years old and has been in the hospital for heart attacks this year tvice."

He coughed diplomatically and I knew he was about to bring up a delicate subject. "I'm not supposed to know prowisions of a living man's vill. I must charge two hundred dollars additional for the cost of learning."

I scowled, took out the appropriate piece of plastic from my wallet, and settled accounts, wondering privately if there was more than one con man in that smoke-clogged office.

Friday morning the roar of garbage trucks in the street woke me early. Dr. and Mrs. Sedler should have returned to their high rise last night, but I decided the day was too dreary for work and reserved the weekend for my call on the sawbones and his lady.

While I scraped my face in front of the bathroom mirror I put in a smidgen of brainwork for Cogan by going back over my hypothesis, looking for flaws the way a dog owner might inspect his favorite mutt for fleas.

Assuming that both Cogan and the Moultons were telling the truth as they saw it, how could the hapless actor and his Lona have been invisible to everyone else at the Moultons' party? *Only if Cogan had walked into the wrong party and never knew it!*

According to his story he had followed a group of people he didn't know into the high rise, taken an elevator with them, gotten off with them, and followed them to the last door on the left where a party was in progress—a different party than the one he'd been invited to.

No wonder he hadn't seen anyone he knew, and no wonder the

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Moultons and the other people from the play hadn't seen him. He'd been either above or below the Moulton apartment. And since the traveling Johnstons in 11-D had been ruled out, that left the Sedlers in 9-D.

Suddenly I realized what part of the picture I'd been overlooking. If it was just rotten luck that had framed Cogan, and if there really was a Lona somewhere who could prove Cogan's alibi—and Cogan's claim that there was had been reported in the papers—then the murderer would have to be hunting the missing woman himself, counting on taking her out before she learned of her own importance in the case and ran to the cops.

I threw on a suit and sped out into the drizzly morning. A cab dropped me off under the stainless-steel portico at the high-rise entrance.

I flashed my badge case at the doorman, pressed the buzzer for 9-D, told the metallic voice over the annunciator that I was official, and was invited up.

Three minutes later, sitting across from George and Flora Sedler in their breakfast nook, I popped the big question.

"Did you and Mrs. Sedler have a party here three weeks ago last Saturday?"

"Yes, Sergeant Burdett, we did," Mrs. Sedler answered. "We're great party givers, aren't we, dear?"

"A very large party?" I pressed her. "So that perhaps you didn't know everyone who dropped in?"

"It *was* rather chaotic," the good doctor conceded in a tone hinting that his half of the partnership could do happily without such affairs.

"Several waiters in white jackets hired for the occasion?"

"Four," Dr. Sedler replied. He sneaked an unclassifiable look at his wife and seemed about to ask me something but her answering look discouraged him and he shut his mouth.

"Was there a young woman at your party who was short and slender, dark hair cut short, dark complexion, wearing a silver pantsuit and calling herself Lona?"

The sawbones sprang up like a jack-in-the-box, his face purple with excitement.

"I *knew* you'd ask that! It's just what the other officer asked Flora last night while I was out. Yes, sir, the woman you describe was here

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for a while that Saturday. But her name isn't Lona, it's Carol Wolfe, and she lives in 9-G, a studio apartment on this floor! I noticed her standing over by the window once during the evening, but the next time I looked she was gone."

"What was that you said about another officer?" I asked.

Flora Sedler shot me a disapproving look. "Surely you detectives coordinate with each other? We answered very much the same questions just yesterday evening when—what was his name?—Sergeant Ashby came by."

On instinct I pulled out my wallet and pulled out the photographs of Emmett Pierce and Tony McDonald and thrust them under her nose, trying to make my next question sound like a routine police inquiry. "Ma'am, please don't be offended, but is Sergeant Ashby either of these gentlemen?"

"This one," she said, and handed me back one of the two snaps.

So now I knew who the murderer was, and that he had close to a twelve-hour lead on me. He could have broken into Carol Wolfe's apartment down the hall and killed her during the night. And then I realized: no, by God, he couldn't, because she worked the night shift!

"Call the nearest precinct station," I said to Dr. Sedler. "Have them get some policemen up here on the double!" I tore out on a dead run, flew down the corridor, and around the turn. There it was, 9-G, the door tightly shut. I twisted the knob. It was locked. I pounded it with one hand and hit the bell chime with the other, over and over. A scuttling sound came from inside, then nothing.

I took a closer look at the lock mechanism, dug out my ring of handy-dandy skeleton keys, and slid one after the other into the slot. The fifth key did the trick. I turned the knob gently, hardly breathing now, and let myself in, elbowing the door shut behind me.

The man rushed at me from the kitchen alcove with a carving knife clutched in his hand, his eyes glittering savagely.

I dropped to the floor, caught one of his oncoming feet between my own, and tripped him. He fell hard and landed on the knife. Blood poured out of his slashed wrist and palm and he screamed. I pounded his head against the baseboard until he wasn't screaming any more, then stumbled to my feet, panting furiously.

He was the man in the photo Flora Sedler had handed back to me. Short, well built, with trim light hair receding up the middle and a

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tiny moustache. Emmett Pierce.

A low moan came from inside the studio apartment. I found her lying bound and gagged behind the daybed—a short slender woman with a dark complexion and her hair boyishly cut.

I untied her and gently pulled the masking-tape off her mouth. "It's all right," I said softly, "we got him." She collapsed sobbing against my chest.

"The police are on the way," I told her. "Are you the woman who went to the Sedlers' party and spent the night with Roy Cogan?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

I lifted her to the daybed and raced back up the hall. Just as I passed the bank of elevators the door of one cage slid open and disgorged two uniformed cops.

"That way!" I pointed. "9-G! Hurry, officers, hurry!"

They trotted to where I pointed with their pistols drawn and I slipped into the waiting elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor. I was across Broadway before the ambulance screamed through the intersection and into 87th Street.

Most of what I didn't already know I learned from Josef Masaryk's pipeline into headquarters. Emmett Pierce had realized that he could double his share of his father's fortune by killing his sister before the old man died.

That Saturday night when he made his move, he had no idea how circumstances were conspiring to make poor Cogan look like the murderer.

When he read in the papers about Cogan's alibi, he knew he had to track the lady down before she got wise and sent the police back on the right trail. And roughly twelve hours before I had visited the Sedlers, he'd solved the puzzle as I had and paid his own visit.

When the last information had surfaced, I put in one more call to Indianapolis. "All charges against you have been dropped," I told Cogan. "You don't have to sweat it any more."

"I'll never be able to repay you, Milo," he said. "But maybe this will help. You don't have to sweat it any more either. My plan worked."

"My God, Cogan, you're a genius!" I raved into the mouthpiece. "How did you pull it off?"

"I hired a hit man of my own to take the Vegetables off the market,"

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he replied, and I remembered those rumors about his ties to the more forceful side of what we laughingly call the underworld. "I got the good word a couple of hours ago and you'll hear it on Cronkite tonight. Their private jet blew up in midair this morning with all the Vegetables aboard."

"Amigo," I told him fervently, "your debt is cancelled. Next time we meet, I'm buying." And with a song in my heart I hung up and proceeded to pack my bag with its assortment of identities and check out of the hotel and the city. It was time to get back to making a living.

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Fresh out of the Army, Sam Maskell had another battle to fight . . .

HOMECOMING

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Once brown, the traveler's hair had been sun-tarnished several shades lighter, so that his apparently artless blue eyes looked more vivid by contrast. His cheeks should have glowed healthily in that context. But now, sitting on a milestone on the hillside above Carradyke, his skin had a greenish tint beneath the tan.

Taking him in at a glance, Celia Pine diagnosed a teenager who couldn't take his drink and was washed out after a heavy party.

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She had been slowing for the halt line marking entry into the main road. She stopped on impulse, reversed, and wound the window down. "I'm going to Carra if you want a lift."

His measuring look shocked her when she realized he was assessing the chance of her being a prostitute. She doubted whether he had celebrated his 21st birthday. Then he smiled with a hint of apology. "Thank you kindly, Miss."

"Mrs.," she corrected him crisply.

The blue eyes twinkled. "I asked for that, didn't I? I'm sorry. I'll just get my kitbag over there, if you'll hold on."

When the fat olive-drab sausage of luggage had been loaded, they started off.

"You're a soldier, then," she said.

"Was. I've done my time, finished." The closing word had a flat finality about it that chilled her. While radiating no menace toward her, the stranger was not quite comfortable company. "Only locals call my old home town Carra, but you're not a Carradyke lady."

"No, I'm a Londoner. My husband works here. But I like Carradyke, pollution and all. The people are tough but honest."

The youth gave the road ahead a poker player's look. "All tough—some honest," he amended dryly.

"You sound like my husband."

He snorted amusement. "Then he's no fool." They passed an invisible frontier, with fat, sappy hedges on either side of the road that were abruptly stunted and withered, showing bare patches where bushes had died. There was a pungency of chemical smoke, and factory whistles mooed and yowled from various quarters of the town.

The hiker showed little interest, for someone returning home. "This'll do, Miss," he murmured, jerking his head at a corner pub. He hauled the kitbag off the back seat with a grunt of effort. It released a metallic tinkling while bumping across the doorsill. "Thank you kindly, but don't go picking up strangers round these parts. Your husband would say the same."

Something about him had caught her interest, and Bill Pine had trained his wife to be nosey. "What's your name?" she asked as she put the car into gear.

He looked at her, then shrugged as if it didn't matter. "Maskell, Missus, that's my name. Sam Maskell." Again the rare genuine smile.

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"Notorious family in Carra, we are. 'Maskells—born to be hung,' that's the saying."

Celia poured Detective-Inspector Pine a second glass of wine—supermarket burgundy that he jeered at as matured in plastic yet managed to dispose of, helped by her good cooking. "Why are the Maskells born to be hung, darling?"

Bill chuckled and shook his head. "The things you come out with! Well, back before the Industrial Revolution, when this was farmland, the Maskells were local peasants and great poachers. They survived after the factories came, and still managed to poach. Old Hector cleared all the peacocks from the Memorial Park in 1951 and got away with a laughable fine; we English applaud tradition."

"Oh. . . But they're not *villains?*"

"Never." Inspector Pine was definite. "Within the unwritten law, real poachers who kill for the pot aren't regarded as criminals. A Maskell was on the town council for years. Not that they aren't hard men. Hector won the M.C. in Flanders during the First World War—he was a demon sniper, a natural shot—by holding up a German assault group for half a day and saving his platoon. His son was decorated for bravery on D-Day and his grandson was talked of for a posthumous V.C. in Korea.

He relished the wine. "Warriors," he summed up, with a flicker of local pride. Then he sighed and raised the empty glass in a toast. "All gone, more's the pity. No more Maskells in Carradyke."

"You're wrong," Celia said. "What about Sam? I gave him a lift from the crossroads this morning."

Pine put the glass down carefully. "Sam. Stella Maskell's son. She remarried after Julian died, but he must have stuck to his father's surname. But he's only a kid."

"Time passes," she reminded him. "This Sam is adult, I assure you. Old enough to have served in the Army and be let out again. Hard men—yes, he's that all right. I never doubted he'd be a better friend than an enemy. I was glad I hadn't offended him."

"Oh, you'd be safe enough with a Maskell," Bill replied abstractedly. "Nature's gentlemen until you offend their sense of natural justice. But even then they'd never harm a woman."

Inspector Pine prowled away from the dining table and stuck the

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phone between his cheek and shoulder as he lit his pipe. "Georgie? Sorry, old sport. I know you're off-watch, but we may have troubles. Sam Maskell's come back. Yes, that one, her son. Well, what can we do? Stand by to pick up the pieces. I'll talk to the boy when I find him, but if he's like the rest of the family. . . O.K., Georgie, bear it in mind, eh?"

They were washing up when Celia gave in and asked, "What was that about?"

Pine scrubbed the casserole dish with savage thoroughness. "It's about Doug Walmer."

Celia shuddered, knowing why her husband was quietly angry. Carradyke had fairly little organized crime, but what there was could be put down to Walmer. He had been pointed out to her at the greyhound racing track: feverish cheeks, meaty restless hands, a fixed grin.

The mere sight of him turned her stomach, and she would have divined that he was an evil man without Bill Pine's expert assistance.

Doug Walmer liked hurting people, and he had a weakness for women. His brothel, and recruitment for it, gave him the opportunity to indulge both tastes. Likewise extortion, robbery, and intimidation. Detective-Inspector Pine had wanted Walmer for years.

"Where does your phone call about Sam Maskell fit in? He seemed a straight boy, and you said the family weren't real criminals. Not like Walmer."

Pine said, "Walmer's after a widow named Stella Smith. She's mature but still very sexy. And with life insurance from two deceased husbands, she's rather well off. Walmer is pushing. Sam is the lady's son."

Celia started putting the crockery away. "And Sam wouldn't like Walmer for a stepfather?"

Amusement diluted Inspector Pine's preoccupation. "Marriage isn't Mr. Walmer's style. But Sam wouldn't like him, full stop. Anyway, his mother loathes Walmer—I daresay she sent Junior an S.O.S."

Remembering the candid blue eyes, the rather old-fashioned dignity and courtesy to a strange woman, Celia sighed. "You think you might have to—well, arrest Sam Maskell if he causes a rumpus? Bill, go easy on the boy."

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Pine folded his arms and laughed shortly. "My dear girl! Rumpus? I'm afraid your precious Sam will get himself killed."

At about the time Inspector Pine was drinking wine and recalling local tradition, Sam Maskell walked into the private bar of The Narrow Boat.

The Boat was a rambling nineteenth-century pub overlooking, and trying not to slide into, the canal.

Its private bar was nothing of the kind, anyone having legal right of access during licensed drinking hours. However, the room with its bottle-glass window only inches above the water was not welcoming to strangers. Regulars took drinks there, and the publicans kept out of the way.

When Sam drifted in, Doug Walmer was holding court and conducting business. His hand flicked, snapping away phantom drops of water, and a skinny blonde clutched her breast, yelped, and jumped back. "Get to work, luv," said Walmer amiably. She went, without question. "I want fifty quid in your handbag when you get back," Walmer called after her. This raised a chuckle although he was in earnest and she knew it.

Sam Maskell was wearing camouflage trousers, the cuffs secured to the tops of his heavy boots by elastic bands, a khaki shirt; and a matching sweater with cloth epaulets and shoulder patches. He put a full glass of scotch and a split of ginger ale on the ledge beside the door, and leaned against the wall.

There were four men in the room besides Sam. Three of them gave questioning orders-seeking looks toward Doug Walmer when the intruder entered and failed to leave within seconds.

Walmer stared at him. "No soldiers served in here, sonny. Nothing personal."

Sam blinked and rubbed his nose. In a conversational tone he inquired whether Walmer was still addicted to perversions with pigs or whether he had gone back to his original obsession, molesting blind children.

Something odd happened to Walmer's face. It seemed to be seen for an instant over intense heat so that the features blurred and wavered. The two men flanking him started forward, moving in step.

Young Maskell swayed away from the wall. "Peter Blake, Jimmy

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Hedges—stay there, or I'll break your backs. I hurt you bad when we were at school and I wasn't even trained then. You'd better think on it." The men halted.

"Ah, you'll be Sam Maskell," Walmer breathed. "She's been threatening me with you, your lovely mum. All right lads, leave him." He smirked. "Fam'ly business, right?"

It was a deft retreat. Walmer was saving face by giving an order Blake and Hedges were determined to obey. Playground cowards and bullies, the pair had grown into hired thugs.

Blake gabbled, "Watch out, Dougie, he's Sass—Special Air Service—bleedin' killers they are."

Sam discovered that Walmer had most peculiar eyes. Fix them, as he was doing, and the pupils seemed to whirl like the black center of water winding down a plughole.

Walmer said softly, "I'm terrified. There's only one of him, and I've got time, and I run this town. Yeah, I'm terrified."

Sam stared into the plugholes. "I'm not afraid of you, Walmer. I'm not afraid of anything. You know that's true. So leave my mother alone, forget all that. And get out of here, I want to drink in peace. This used to be a good clean pub."

Blake and Hedges responded so quickly that they jammed in the doorway so anxious were they to leave. The third of Walmer's party, a pudgy older fellow with a good suit and an office worker's soft hands, smiled meekly and hastened after the thugs.

He was a yard away when, without breaking eye contact with Walmer, Sam hunched and drew his right knee up to his chest, his hands planted against the wall, one boot sticking out a shade below waist level. By then the pudgy man had launched a full-blooded kick and could not retrieve it.

His shin impacted on the toe of Sam's boot. He screamed and fell on his side, his leg shattered. A straight razor, already open, slid out of his sleeve, slicing his plump palm as it shot free.

Sam crossed to Walmer in a stride. "I said out." Sam picked him up, the bow window exploded, and Walmer made a mighty splash in the canal.

Sam whirled, but the man with the razor was dragging himself away, whining for an ambulance, and a white-faced tonsured old fellow had sidled into the bar, quivering with emotion, his hands raised placatingly.

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Putting a finger to his lips he whispered, "Glory, I've waited more'n ten years for this. I never thought I'd be pleased to see my own premises wrecked."

"My wife sends her regards," said Detective-Inspector Pine. "As for me, I don't know whether to caution you, commend you, or buy you a wreath, young man."

Sam looked at him sharply, started to say something, and then changed his mind. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

They were in the garden of his mother's house. Sparrows scolded and gossiped in the weeping willow and dew made diamonds on the green velvet lawn. The sky was acrid with chemicals, the new sun watery above the smoke, but there was an air of the country. Sam Maskell sat in a gaudy deckchair, a chinchilla rabbit on his lap, his square-tipped fingers gentling it mechanically.

"Do I need a solicitor, sir? Is this, like, formal?"

"No. I'm not here. Yet." Pine leaned back in his deckchair. Sam's mother had brought them coffee and disappeared. She had a wide lined forehead and Sam's blue eyes. Narrow-backed, full-bosomed, and queenly—Doug Walmer would enjoy breaking her.

Pine ticked points on his fingers. "The Narrow Boat loses a window and the landlord reckons he pushed a piano through it, which elevates clumsiness to the status of an art form, but there you are.

"A gentleman, using the word in its loosest form, turns up at the casualty department of Carradyke General in a taxi, claiming to have busted his leg in a car accident. He discharges himself at dawn and goes home to Glasgow for the first time in five years. Two more of Walmer's frighteners set off for Blackpool the same night, announcing they intended trying for seasonal work for the rest of the summer."

Sam pursed his lips and blew little craters in the rabbit's fur. "I daresay they won't be missed, all three of them. Who's this Walmer?"

Inspector Pine disciplined a smile. "He's the one seen sneaking home, soaking wet, with canal weed all over him."

"I like a nice swim myself," Sam tendered neutrally.

"Very funny. You've had your say, lad. Walmer got the message, he won't pester your mother any more. Now quit while you're ahead."

"I'm not afraid of him," Sam stated, still neutrally.

Pine cursed under his breath. The boy disappointed him, he was a

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fool.

"Listen, Walmer makes money, lots of money, out of fear. If you stay in Carradyke and remind people he's fallible it will hit him in the wallet and you'll force him to do something extreme."

Sam spilt the rabbit off his lap. On his feet, he was spring-tense. "I know that! I'm not daft. But I've got to make sure he stays away from Mum. For good and all."

"He will, you don't have to be here to get that result. Walmer will reckon on your turning up again if he steps out of line."

"That's not good enough." Sam shrugged. "I'm sorry, sir, I know you've got your job to do and all that, but I've got to be sure."

Inspector Pine rose too. His tone hardened. "Next time, it'll be official, Mr. Maskell. Understood?"

Sam grinned sourly, and Pine snapped, "For God's sake, boy, where d'you think you're going, carrying on this way?"

"Funny you should say that." Sam lit a cigarette and held it clipped between his front teeth, wagging as he spoke. They talked together for another ten minutes before Pine went to his car, rubbing the back of his neck, trying to read the future.

Later that day Sergeant George phoned in, asking Pine to come to the new shopping arcade.

In a liquor shop, a determined-looking trader, some uniformed officers, two gypsyish youths in handcuffs, and Sergeant George awaited him. A tall display of bottles had been toppled and lay in splintery puddled disarray.

The brace of thugs had entered the shop, explained that they worked for Doug Walmer, and demanded a hundred pounds "insurance premium." The trader had heard of Walmer. He had also heard of the incident at The Narrow Boat. He had been a fairground boxer and was a judo enthusiast. He had made a citizen's arrest.

The thugs admitted demanding money with menace, but fervently denied any connection with Walmer.

Inspector Pine decided that it could be regarded as a draw—even a technical K.O.—when one considered that Walmer had been denied finance, for the moment at least.

He also decided that he would not like to insure Sam Maskell's life. "Watch the Maskell boy," he ordered Sergeant George.

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But Maskell was not to be found.

Sam Maskell had moved out within minutes of Inspector Pine's visit. After the phone call.

The voice had been young and female. "Sammy, remember me? Recognize the voice?"

"Uh, yeah. It's Teresa."

"No! Think! From school. I work for somebody we both know. He phoned London first thing today. They're coming on the twelve o'clock train—he's booked them in at the Castle Hotel. Sid Whelan, that nice boy with the limp you used to pal up with at school, he's the manager there. Bye."

Boscow and Charlton barged into their suite at the Castle, talking boisterously, pleased to be on earners out in yokel territory. Boscow had the cricket bag containing two sawed-off shotguns and plenty of cartridges. Charlton had the bottles.

They noticed Sam too late, when he was between them and the door.

"Afternoon, gents. I'm the feller Walmer's paying you to top." He extended his hand, but they shrank back from shaking it.

He was holding a hand grenade. The pin was out, held in the corner of his mouth as some men chew a matchstick. "This is a private argument, him and me. I haven't time nor patience to bugger about with outsiders."

His fingers opened a fraction. "We can settle it now. I'm not scared, see. You can sling your hooks, go back to London, or I can let go and finish it now. Either way, my problem's over."

Charlton's diction was poor, since his lips were jamming against his breath-dried teeth and he was mortally afraid. "He means it, Bos."

"I know, you berk!" Boscow whimpered. "We just resigned, Mister, know what I mean?"

Sam waited in the suite. The grenade sat like a table lighter at his elbow. The professionals had remembered the cricket bag but left the bottles behind. He mixed a mild drink, working one-handed while the other rested beside the weapon.

The phone rang. One of his friends was dispatcher for a local taxi firm. "They caught the London express, no monkey tricks."

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Sam checked that the pin was secure in the grenade before rolling it inside swimming trunks and a towel. He slid the bundle into a plastic shopping bag and went out into the streets.

Doug Walmer prowled through the Covered Market with its double row of squalid barrows and stalls obscuring some graceful Georgian stonework and tracery. Halfway along, a gigantic huckster with a frog face noticed Walmer and winked heavily, nudging a crony.

Inwardly, Walmer seethed with rage. *Nobody* laughed at him. But he masked his temper. He needed Fat Frank.

"Wotcher, Doug." It had been Mr. Walmer the last time. "How's your luck?"

Walmer gulped bile. "Your luck's in, Frank, I can tell you that. I'm going to make you rich. Throw in a bird if you want."

The frog man rolled his eyes. "And it ain't even Christmas! For that, I—?"

"See to bloody Maskell," Walmer admitted, hating him.

Fat Frank sucked in a whistle. He wagged his fingers at chin level and blew on them. "Sorry, Doug. Too rich for my blood. He put Razor Jock in the hospital last night without raising his voice, in a manner of speaking."

"You can go with a mob, take as many as you like." It was half a lifetime since Doug Walmer had pleaded. "I'll pay a hundred per man, you can give 'em what you see fit. You'll make a grand, no trouble. I'll stand for two grand even."

Fat Frank's dewlaps swung from side to side. "And buy meself a fancy tombstone? No, thanks."

Walmer said, "I'll remember this when I've attended to Maskell."

"You do that—ponce," said Fat Frank. But he didn't say it loudly, and Walmer was stamping away when he voiced the suggestion.

Wheezing meditatively, Fat Frank rolled himself a cigarette. Sam Maskell straightened up from behind Frank's barrow with its load of soft-porn magazines.

"Getting anxious," he said.

Fat Frank nodded. "You ought to wipe him, Sammy-son. Waste him, like the Yanks say. He's going berserk."

"I can't do that, Frank." Sam cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It wouldn't be right."

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"Well, look after yourself, mate."

"You taught me how, Frank."

The frog man shook his head again. "I still think you ought to do him."

Celia Pine was saying much the same thing. Inspector Pine had slipped in for a belated lunch—Carradyke Main Police Station was less than five hundred yards from their home, which was why he'd spent a fortune on a Victorian terraced house with dry rot *and* damp rot—and he had just, under seal of secrecy, brought her up to date on the duel.

"If *you* think Walmer might murder the boy, then the boy must know it too. Why doesn't he just get in first?"

Pine had lost his appetite. "Maskell isn't a boy, he's a highly trained specialist soldier."

"All the more reason for him to zap that foul man. You've said yourself Walmer's killed and gotten away with it. It'd be, well, a sort of execution."

Inspector Pine swallowed some ham. "Sam Maskell couldn't do that. It sounds crazy and pompous, but he's an honorable man. I've told you, none of that family are criminals. He might kill for his country, probably has, but murder—he could no more do that, in cold blood, than put his own mother on the streets."

Pushing his plate away, he added wearily, "That's the irony. Young Maskell's pushing the bastard for all he's worth, but Walmer's safe as houses."

Walmer couldn't settle to anything. He had fled to his big house on a limestone shelf above the town where he could go out on the patio and see Carradyke as a bowl of ants under smoke. Thanks to Maskell and the police, he had lost five men in a little under 24 hours. The London team had phoned from the station to reject his contract. He had been unable to recruit his usual local freelances.

Hold on, he told himself. The kid's bound to get tired. Or careless. Both, like as not. Tomorrow, Walmer resolved, he'd drive down the motorway and see what Birmingham, Leeds, or Manchester had to offer.

Somebody must want the money.

The thin blonde watched him pacing. He'd called her in for diver-

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sion, but had changed his mind.

Just then the phone rang; he picked it up.

"Walmer? You know who this is—I gave you a swim."

Walmer's fingers squeaked on the receiver.

"Look," the young voice picked up after a pause, "there's no point in keeping this going. I know what you can do, you know what I can, am I right?"

Exultation burned in Doug Walmer's veins, but he kept his tone empty. "You started it. I'm a reasonable man."

A laugh rattled in the phone. "No, you're not—you're a bag of wind. Do you think I'm asking for a truce? You must be past it. No, I'm saying if you want to carry on you've got to do it with a partner. Get me?"

The voice was implacable, dancing with malice now. Walmer made to smash the receiver against the wall, checking himself at the last moment.

"You're finished, the whole town's laughing at you. You've got no respect any more. But you do have the connections still, a good list of customers and all your whores, so I'll give you a break. We'll go halves."

Doug Walmer wasn't listening. He prided himself on seeing three moves ahead, where straights predicted one and a half, if that. He'd assumed that Sam Maskell was protecting his mother. What an idiot he'd been! He almost deserved what was happening. But not quite. Not yet.

He produced a shaken reply to the last remark he'd heard. "Partner? Maybe you're right. We've got to talk about it."

"No talk, action. I want five thousand quid in cash, as a mark of good faith, to get us off on the right foot. I'll collect it tonight."

Walmer spoke quickly. "Not here. The law may be watching."

"A meet? Fair enough. But if you don't come alone, you'll regret it." Maskell hung up on him. The phone pealed a second later. Walmer smiled horribly. The kid was tense, all right. . .

"I forgot, the meet will be on the old Rec' Ground by the Gasworks." Walmer knew the place, a shrewd choice—you couldn't get a car past the iron gates and it would be solitary if not utterly deserted after dark.

"Come on your own," Sam Maskell repeated. "Walk up the main path, and I'll find you in my own good time. Be there at ten o'clock. If

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you're late I'll firebomb one of your places for every minute you've kept me waiting."

This time it was Doug Walmer who hung up. Yes, the kid was shaking, so close to the pot. A real pro, Walmer's kind of animal, didn't pile threat on threat. Sam Maskell was being blinded by greed.

Walmer turned on the blonde. She whimpered, choking on a soft-center chocolate. Under the wispy hair over her temple he could see a vein beat.

Walmer said, "We started playing Canasta at eight o'clock. I won both games. Then we turned in early, about ten past ten near as you remember."

Flinging her off the couch, he scribbled figures on a sheet, crumpled it, and let it lie on the card table. "That's the scores of the games. You figure we went to sleep about ten past ten, 'cause you'd left the telly on in 'here, being an idle, sloppy cow, and you remember hearing *News at Ten* starting when you dozed off. At half past ten you woke up and came out to switch it off, and I was in bed still."

Walmer advanced stiff-legged, turning every now and then to assure himself that the Jaguar was still parked and ready, facing away from the recreation ground. The hulking drums of the gasometers made black castles against a night sky turned orange by street lamps on the far side of the open ground.

Sam Maskell lay beneath a bush, trying to remember the last time he had been at the Rec'. Just a tiddler at the time, Primary School Sports Day used to be held here. Egg and Spoon, S. Maskell, Miss Horris had put him in the Reds' relay team and he'd snivelled, liking the Yellows' sash better.

Something larger than a mouse and smaller than a rat ran across the back of his hand. Sam did not move. Looking slightly to one side of objects he scanned, night vision perfectly adjusted, he kept surveillance on the shaggy grass, the tarmac paths, the bristle of broken and twisted iron railings surrounding the field.

He had registered Doug Walmer's car arriving, before Walmer himself had properly realized that he had driven as far as he could.

Walmer was alone. Occasionally, though, a section of railing behind him would thicken momentarily, or raise a crop of pimples at its base.

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Sam clicked his tongue disapprovingly. He didn't know what Walmer made of it, but this wasn't Trooper Maskell's idea of an ambush. . .

When Walmer was ten feet away, Sam levered himself up off the ground. "Got the money, partner?"

It seemed to Sam that a furnace door had been opened and then slammed shut right before his eyes. He felt the searing heat; a red rosette with a brown-black velvet border filled his sight and hurt the optic nerve.

Strangely enough, the slam of the furnace door came after the light and heat. The stars wheeled past the corner of his eye. The tarmac bumped the back of his head. Perfect.

Cold. Darker than night. He forgot the plan. He could not think of anything. So cold. "Mum!" he said, and although Walmer kept firing the self-loading pistol, straddling him and bending so close that he set the boy's combat smock smoldering, Sam was dead before the last bullet hit him.

Walmer's forefinger hurt and his ears were popping. He thrust the pistol into the deep side pocket of his camel's hair coat and turned to sprint for the car.

Headlights—no, torches and small searchlights—spoked from different quarters, with Walmer as the hub, and there was an inhuman electronic shout. "Police! Stand still, we are armed!"

In the interview room at Carradyke Main Doug Walmer noticed that the thin drawn-looking copper, Pine, had missed a triangular patch when shaving earlier in the day.

"Your solicitor's on his way," Pine was explaining drearily.

Walmer said, "Cocky little sod. I fixed him, eh? Unarmed combat? He couldn't put a bloody fancy hold on a bullet though."

Pine's mouth worked briefly. "You'd better not say anything just now. We'll do this by the book."

Walmer belched, belly sour, and turned the belch into a laugh. "You got me, I cocked it up, the last part. Still, I fixed him. I won."

Inspector Pine folded his arms. "You're sure of that, are you?"

Doug Walmer's upper lip pulled back and suddenly his expression was less than rational. "All right, so I'll go inside. But I beat that little—"

Pine addressed the corner of the room, above Walmer's head. "Sam

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Maskell wanted you out of the way for his mother's sake. But he couldn't kill you, it went against his grain. So he did the next best thing."

"I killed *him*!"

The policeman nodded patiently. "And when you come out you'll be sixtyish—finished and useless, no threat to anyone."

"I beat him," Walmer mumbled.

"No," said Pine, with grinding satisfaction. "He pulled your strings from the start, you poor fool. He made you crazy to kill him.

"Sam Maskell wasn't demobbed from the Army in the regular way—he was invalided out, because of an incurable illness. This time next year he'd have been dead anyway."

The October issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale September 14.

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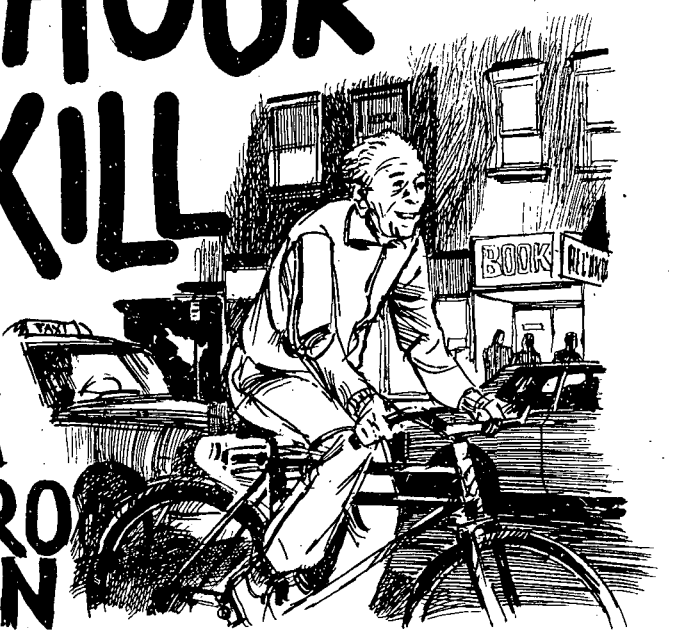
An hour can seem like a minute . . .

AN HOUR TO KILL

by

EDITH PIÑERO GREEN



When Benjamin Pinch interrupted his father's morning workout to insist that Dearborn accompany him to a meeting with Consolidated Edison, Dearborn was outraged. And why? Because the power company was threatening to sue him! Well, they would have to find him before they could sue him, and he had no more intention of showing up than he had of forking over.

"Dad," Benjamin had said, "I think we'd better try to settle out of

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court."

"I do not intend to allow those hooligans to stigmatize me as a fool who can't tell an electricity bill from a square of toilet tissue."

"You said yourself you flushed away the last eight months' worth of bills."

"With reason, Benjamin. When the electric service improves, I shall honor their requests for payment."

"The meeting will only take an hour. What's one lousy hour?"

Dearborn was shocked. "You take a flippant view of time. Sixty minutes can be a moment or an eternity. Time is subject to the laws governing acceleration."

"Einstein, Dad?"

"That's it precisely."

"The subject is Con Ed, Dad."

"The subject, Benjamin, is time."

Benjamin had forgotten that Dearborn's rooftop gym had a back door leading to the service elevator. There hadn't been time for Dearborn to slip back into his apartment or change out of his sweatsuit, but fortunately he did have a five-dollar bill tucked into his pocket so he wasn't destitute.

He retrieved from the basement storeroom the fenderless dented Schwinn that had carried Benjamin to and from preparatory school twenty years before and went sightseeing, an activity he relished but seldom indulged. It was an exhilarating day and it was nearly nine when Dearborn—his lean body bent over the handlebars, his hair tousled, his sweatsuit wrinkled—found himself on Lexington Avenue pedaling uptown. It was chilly for April and he was still a long way from home, rolling along at a lively clip, when the lights went out.

For a moment Dearborn wondered if his sight was failing. He braked and slid off the bicycle seat. Then he noticed that cars on either side of him had slowed down and were stopping. He peered up at the traffic signal and swiveled his head to glance at the windows on either side of the street. The lights were out. That was it! Those harebrained idiots at Con Ed had raised the deuce with the electrical system again!

Dearborn could just make out the corner street sign. More than thirty blocks to go. He'd have to walk the rest of the way, but he didn't intend to attempt it without fortification. He spied a bar halfway

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up the next block—Chester's. Not the most promising-looking establishment, but then he wasn't dressed for La Grenouille.

He made his way through the stalled traffic, grumbling all the while at the perversities of fortune. He stopped in front of Chester's and chained his bicycle to a No Parking sign.

The man behind the bar was lighting the last of half a dozen foot-tall candles. Each candle rested in a saucer collared with a dusty wreath of plastic holly leaves. In the flickering light the faces of the handful of customers slouched over them floated eerily in space like spectral holographs. The bartender, an undistinguished man in rolled shirtsleeves, looked up and said curtly, "We're closed."

Dearborn was in no mood to be crossed. "This is a public bar, is it not?" he demanded.

Five of the six patrons turned to regard Dearborn with dull eyes. The sixth was an inebriate slumped over the far end of the bar with his head on the counter and his face turned toward the wall.

"Yeah," the bartender returned, "but I'm not serving new customers till the blackout's over. I was just coming around to lock the door."

"A commendable precaution," Dearborn announced. He closed the door and threw the bolt.

It seemed to Dearborn that a faint suspiration, like escaping steam, wafted along the length of the bar.

"A glass of burgundy," Dearborn ordered, stepping up to the bar. The bartender glared at him indecisively, then turned to rattle among the bottles on the shelf behind him. He pulled out a bottle, slapped a glass down in front of Dearborn, and poured.

The row of impassive faces was still turned toward Dearborn. He met the eyes of the customer sitting next to him, a rough-looking individual of about forty, thick-necked and brawny, wearing a sweatshirt, a pair of dog tags on a silver chain around his neck, and a froth of beer on his upper lip.

"Damned inconvenient," Dearborn commented.

The brawny individual showed no sign of having heard him so Dearborn transferred his gaze to the customer beyond, an insipid-looking young man with an open shirt collar and an unknotted tie, whose vapid eyes were fixed glumly on Dearborn.

"Nothing to do but wait it out, eh?" said Dearborn.

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The young man appeared not to notice that he was being addressed. Dearborn looked hopefully to the woman at the young man's left. She was middle-aged, with bobbing red sausage curls poking out from under a recklessly wound green turban that was haphazardly fastened with a cameo brooch.

"I hope it doesn't turn out to be one of those all-night affairs," Dearborn ventured. Then realizing the comment might be open to misinterpretation, he cleared his throat ostentatiously and shifted his attention to the man beyond her, a shabby fellow with a rigid posture and sunglasses. His head was turned toward Dearborn but it was apparent that he was blind. Hooked over the edge of the bar at his elbow was a white cane, and twisted around his wrist was the braided strap of a dog's leash.

To his left, at the far end of the bar, was the sleeping drunk and next to him, at the inside corner of the bar, was a thin bony woman in her late forties or early fifties. She was dispiritedly twisting the knotted straps of a string bag and looking at Dearborn with gloomy eyes.

They were behaving like zombies. Peculiar. Most peculiar. "An interesting subject, time," Dearborn cast into the void. "An hour can pass like a minute while a minute can seem like an hour."

"Lemme have a refill, Chester," the gloomy woman broke in, disregarding Dearborn.

"That is because," Dearborn went on, "time is subject to the laws governing acceleration."

The bartender shook his head. "I wouldn't if I was you, Cora."

"Our time on earth is limited," Dearborn proceeded determinedly, "which is as good a reason as any for spending one's time well."

"I'm not gonna get through without it," the gloomy woman mumbled.

"In times of crisis," Dearborn pontificated, "such as this power failure, time can hang heavy. A moment can seem—"

"Rest easy, Cora," the blind man spoke up reassuringly. "Everything'll be O.K., once the cops get here."

Dearborn paused in mid-sentence.

"I'll go out and look for a cop," the brawny individual declared, "but I'm not stickin' around till the ambulance gets here."

"You have to," the young man spoke up. "You were the one who discovered—" His voice trailed off. His eyes caught Dearborn's and

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shied away.

Dearborn put down his glass.

"It was George who noticed he stopped breathin'," the brawny man responded.

Something was certainly amiss. Dearborn rapped on the bar with his knuckles. "What is going on here?" he demanded imperiously. "Has something occurred that I should know about?"

"Are you a cop?" the gloomy woman asked.

"No, Madam, but when I am inadvertently involved in an adventure, I wish to know what it's about."

"We don't need a cop," the sausage-curl lady said. "What we need is an undertaker."

All heads turned to regard the semi-recumbent figure at the end of the bar.

Dearborn followed their gaze. He mistrusted the evidence of his senses. "He isn't—that fellow isn't—"

"Dead," the sausage-curl lady acknowledged. She rolled her eyes heavenward.

"His heart give out," the bartender announced.

"Have you called an ambulance?"

"I tried," the bartender answered. "The circuits are tied up. Rudy was just getting ready to go for a cop."

Dearborn struggled to retain his composure. "Has no one attempted to revive the poor fellow?"

Rudy said, "I served with the medics in Viet Nam. I could see there was no use givin' him mouth-to-mouth."

"You just didn't want to waste your breath on him," the blind man cut in.

Rudy half rose.

A growl issued from under the blind man's stool and he tightened his grip on the leash.

"Perhaps I should take a look at the gentleman," Dearborn declared.

"Why?" the sausage-curl lady asked. "Are you a doctor?"

"No, but I would like to satisfy myself as to his condition." Dearborn left his drink and walked to the far end of the bar. The room was narrow and windowless. An old-fashioned beaded curtain made of brown wooden spools strung on shaggy strands of hemp separated the main room from a passage directly behind the body of the dead man. The

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man's arms dangled limply between his knees. His right cheek rested on the bar, his staring eyes were fixed on the spot where Cora sat.

"When did it happen?" Dearborn inquired.

"After the lights went out," the young man answered. "At least, that's what we figure. Before that he was arguing with Rudy. He was drunk and after a while he put his head down and passed out. For a few minutes he was snoring to beat the band. Then the lights went out. Chester went back to the storeroom for the candles. When he came back he had one lit. Just as he came in, that guy there—" the young man pointed to the blind man "—says he can't hear Art breathing. Rudy went to take a look and sure enough, Art was dead."

"Art? You knew the gentleman then?"

"He ran the building," George, the blind man, explained. "Arthur Suds. Cora there, she's his wife."

"You are his wife, Madam?" Dearborn registered with astonishment.

She nodded dismally. "I come in here at eight-thirty lookin' for him and there he is, sittin' as big as life sloppin' up whiskey. I says, 'Did you fix the hot-water heater?' 'No,' he says. 'Did you take out the garbage?' 'No,' he says."

Dearborn looked down at the dead man's face. His skin was splotchy. His tongue protruded from between his lips and a pool of saliva had collected under his chin. Dearborn didn't know whether there had been any chance of saving him earlier but there was no question of it now.

Cora said in an aggrieved tone to Rudy, "It didn't do no good you fightin' with him."

"He was the one started it," Rudy returned brusquely. "If he had a beef against cabbies, he shoulda kept it to himself."

"He's keepin' it to himself now, all right," the sausage-curl lady commented ruefully. She reached up to rub one of her eyes. When she pulled her hand away, a strip of false eyelashes stuck to the back of her hand. She stared at it thoughtfully, then picked it off her hand and put it into her pocketbook.

Dearborn began to straighten up, then bent his head again. He had noticed something—a mark at the back of the dead man's neck, just at the edge of his collar. Dearborn lowered the collar delicately. A pattern of red marks discolored the flesh. It was a roundish bruise with a raised welt running through it that appeared to circle the dead man's

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throat.

"What's the matter?" the sausage-curl lady asked.

Dearborn stared at the wound.

"What're you lookin' at?" Cora demanded.

Tentatively, Dearborn ran his finger along the ugly inflammation.

"What do you see?" Cora persisted.

Dearborn raised his head. "I think your husband was strangled."

"What are you talkin' about?" Rudy exclaimed.

"Strangled?" George repeated in a bewildered voice. "While we were all sitting here?"

Rudy sprang from his stool. "Lemme see." He strode around the bar and bent over the dead man. Then he looked up at Dearborn with an amazed face. "I didn't look at his neck. I just felt his pulse and checked to see if he was breathin'."

"How do you know he didn't walk into a clothesline?" Chester asked.

"The wound," Dearborn replied, "could not have been sustained without damage to his trachea and perhaps to his spinal column. It is unlikely that it could have happened before he came into the bar."

"You sure you're not a doctor?" Cora asked.

"Quite sure. But I have had some experience with homicide."

"A private eye?"

"Certainly not. Although a set of unhappy circumstances thrust me into the role once or twice."

The young man got off his stool and walked over to stand behind George. "My name's Crimp," he introduced himself gruffly. He made no attempt to examine the body. "Are you saying one of us strangled Suds?"

"So it would appear," Dearborn replied briskly. "The weapon, I would guess, was some sort of garrote, a knotted length of cord or wire or cloth, pulled tight and twisted until Suds was asphyxiated. It couldn't have taken long—a minute at the most."

"No wonder Rudy wants out," George declared.

"You're really askin' for it, you know that?" Rudy bawled. "You think I'd kill a guy because I had a fight with him?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Dearborn reproached. "No particular strength was required. The man was already unconscious. It couldn't have been difficult. He wouldn't have resisted or cried out."

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"Yeah," George cut in, "but Rudy was the one arguing with him."

"And you were the one sittin' next to him, you creep!"

"*I* didn't tell him to swallow his opinions or I'd shove them down his throat."

"Oh, no? How about tellin' him you'd wring his neck?"

"He kicked Storm. He could have broken his ribs."

"If you want my opinion," Mr. Crimp volunteered, "I think Suds was asking for it."

Cora turned on him. "You're nothin' but a troublemaker. You been after Art and me for one thing and another ever since you moved in upstairs—making threats, banging on the pipes, calling up all hours of the day and night!"

Mr. Crimp retorted belligerently, "I'm laying out two hundred dollars for that crummy room—no hot water, a leak over my bed, and roaches big enough to saddle. I might as well live in the men's room at Penn Station."

"He was a stinker," the sausage-curl lady declared, nodding agreement.

"You got some right to talk," Cora said bitterly. "You owed Art a hundred dollars from before Christmas and you still didn't pay him."

"Who says? I paid him today. Not that he needed it with that wad he was carryin'. Ask Chester."

Chester said, "I don't know what she's talking about. I heard Art asking her for the money like he's been asking her for the last three, four months and I heard her telling him to stop bugging her. That's all I know. I didn't see her pay him and I didn't see any money on Art."

"I give it to him," the sausage-curl lady insisted.

"You're real smart, claimin' to of give it to him," Cora said bitterly. "I can kiss that hundred goodbye for all I'm ever goin' to see of it."

"Some wife," the sausage-curl lady countered scathingly. "Your husband's lying there cold as yesterday's turkey and all you're worrying about is laying your hands on his money. Art always did say he wouldn't trust you farther than he could throw you."

The emerging picture of the deceased Mr. Suds was unappetizing, but the group Dearborn faced was even less attractive. However, a hundred-dollar debt, a kicked dog, an insult to one's profession, an unloving wife, or even cockroaches seemed like insufficient provocations for murder. There had to be some more substantial motive.

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Dearborn addressed himself to Mrs. Suds. "You are quite sure your husband was *not* carrying a large sum of money?"

"No, but I'm goin' to find out." She got up from her stool and began emptying her husband's pockets, taking out his keys, matches, a frayed black notebook held by a rubber band, and finally his wallet. She put everything on the counter except the wallet, which she carefully examined. "Five bucks," she announced finally, glancing up at Chester, who nodded with satisfaction.

"There was a roll of bills," the sausage-curl lady insisted. "If it's not there now, somebody's lifted it."

Chester said disparagingly, "You're just saying that because you want Cora to think you gave Art that hundred dollars."

"He had a roll big as your fist!" the sausage-curl lady returned. "Don't play dumb, Chester. You know what it was and where it come from!"

"Maybe you better cool it," Rudy cut in, with a cautioning nod toward Dearborn.

Dearborn reached out and picked up the notebook that Cora had removed from her husband's pocket. He pulled off the rubber band and flipped through the pages.

"That's private property," she objected.

"It won't be when the police arrive, Madam," Dearborn said.

Down the left side of the pages were lists of unrelated words—words like pimple, ostrich, worm, and crop—and down the left were sums of money ranging from a few dollars to a few thousand dollars.

"Unless I miss my guess," Dearborn added, "Mr. Suds was engaged in some lucrative and, no doubt, illegal activity."

Hostility manifested itself in a nervous undercurrent that Dearborn could feel, if not see.

"Come, come," Dearborn persisted, "there's no hiding it. What was it? Gambling? Money-lending?"

"Numbers," Mr. Crimp volunteered suddenly.

"What do you know about it?" Cora said angrily. "You don't know nothin' about what Art did."

"Everybody in the building knew about it."

"Ah," Dearborn sighed. "I assume everyone here also knew about it?"

"Sure, we knew about it," Rudy admitted. "But you're not going to

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catch us tellin' it to the cops."

"The point is that he could very well have been carrying a large sum of money."

"No," Chester said. "Not today. He had a bad day. He was drinking today. When he was drunk nobody laid bets with him."

"Chester's right," Rudy said. "The shape Art was in he didn't know a dollar from a laundry receipt. Besides, if somebody wanted to rob him, they could've robbed him without killing him."

"Perhaps," Dearborn conceded, "but that might have depended on how much money was at stake and what chance the thief had of getting away with the robbery."

"Chester?" Cora appealed. "Is that true?"

"Well, I didn't have a conversation with him about it, but I didn't see him taking no bets in here."

"I'm going for the cops," Rudy announced suddenly.

"Not yet," Dearborn said.

"What do you mean, not yet? We got a dead man here."

"Not to put too fine a point on it," Dearborn responded, "I don't believe Mr. Suds will be inconvenienced by a five- or ten-minute delay."

"What for?"

"To find the murder weapon. Identify it. Confiscate it."

"Why don't you leave that for the cops?"

'You don't understand. You are all suspect. Suppose you were to leave carrying the murder weapon?"

"What murder weapon?" Rudy snapped. "There's nothing on me."

"I'm afraid there is," Dearborn observed. "There's that chain around your neck."

Rudy reached up to touch his dog tags. Then in one swift movement he jerked the chain over his head and banged it down on the bar. "Take it. I got nothin' to be afraid of."

Dearborn picked up the chain and once more bent to examine the roundish bruise on the back of Mr. Suds' neck. The fine marks formed a pattern of some sort but not one that conformed to the engraving on the dog tags. The pattern was familiar though, of that Dearborn was certain. He was positive he had seen something somewhere that fit the bill.

"Well?" Rudy challenged. "You still think I choked him?"

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"No," Dearborn replied, "at least not with this." He handed the chain back to Rudy.

"I wouldn't let him off the hook so easy," George muttered.

"There are other possibilities," Dearborn said.

"Like what?"

"Like the dog's leash you're holding."

"I wasn't even talking to Art before he passed out!"

"I am not accusing you," Dearborn returned. "I'm merely pointing out that you have a weapon. The leash is braided, with a knot near the loop. It would make a very effective garrote."

"I don't think George would of known Art had money on him," the sausage-curl lady said. "He couldn't of seen it."

"No, but you did," Dearborn reminded her. "And you, too, have a weapon—your turban, which is long and narrow, and has the brooch affixed to it."

"Me? You think I done it! You're nuts!"

"Take a look in her purse, why don't you?" Cora suggested.

"He's not a cop," Chester broke in. "He said so himself. He's got no right to search nobody."

"I must point out, Mrs. Suds," Dearborn continued, "that women have been known to dispose of their husbands in rather brutal fashion. And you do have the means. Your string bag, the straps of which are secured to one another by means of a knot, would turn the trick."

"And she had reason too," the sausage-curl lady asserted vindictively. "Art was forever sayin' she spied on him and tried to find out where he kept his money. He had to hide it or she'd of taken it."

"So far you've accused four of us," Mr. Crimp said. "Why stop there? Why not accuse us all? If you have your way it'll be curtains for all of us!"

Dearborn regarded Mr. Crimp with a reproachful expression. It was they who were making the accusations, not he. He was merely pointing out the possibilities. He started to remonstrate but paused suddenly as something clicked into place.

"What are you staring at?" Mr. Crimp demanded. Dearborn's eyes were fixed on a point somewhere between Mr. Crimp's collar and his belt. Mr. Crimp grabbed at his shirtfront, his fingers coming into contact with his tie. "What is it? My tie? You think I choked Suds with my tie? I was nowhere near him! As a matter of fact, I was talking to Rudy

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the whole time Chester was in the storeroom getting the candles. Isn't that right, Rudy?"

Rudy nodded. "He never left his seat."

"Rudy'll agree to anything," George put in, "so long as it gets *him* off the hook."

"You're really askin' for it," Rudy growled.

Dearborn said to George, "Mr. Crimp told me what happened when the lights went out. Suppose you tell me again."

"The candles are in the storeroom," George said, waving toward the passageway in the back of the room. "At first I didn't know what had happened. Everybody got excited. Then Chester told me it was a blackout. He said he was going for candles and then he'd lock the front door so we didn't get any troublemakers coming in."

Dearborn stepped back and studied the scene. "How long was Chester gone?"

"Four or five minutes."

"Mr. Crimp claims that he and Rudy were talking during the interim that Chester was gone. What were you doing?"

"Nothing. The same thing I was doing before the lights went out."

"You were doing something," the sausage-curl lady reminded him. "I was tryin' to light my cigarette and I dropped the match folder. You got down and got it for me because I'm scared of the dog."

"I see," Dearborn said. "Mrs. Suds? What about you?"

"I had to get up to let Chester out from behind the bar."

"What did you do while he was getting the candles?"

"Chester asked me to go behind the counter and shut off the water he left running in the sink."

"I heard her," Rudy verified. "The sink's down the other end of the bar where me and Crimp was sittin'."

"So now what?" asked Chester. "Everybody's got an alibi."

"So it would seem," Dearborn said smoothly. "However, only one of you could have utilized the weapon."

"The weapon?" the sausage-curl lady echoed. "I thought you didn't know what it was."

"I didn't. At least not until Mr. Crimp mentioned it to me."

"Me?" Mr. Crimp exclaimed. "What did I say?"

"You said, and I quote, 'It'll be curtains for all of us.' I realized that it was curtains, all right—for at least one of you." Dearborn reached

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behind him to lift a strand of the beaded curtain, then bent forward to slip it under the dead man's throat. He encircled the throat so that one of the corrugated beads rested at the back of the dead man's neck, matching precisely the discolored bruise.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Rudy said in a baffled voice, "I still don't get it. Nobody was near the curtain."

"Chester was."

"Are you crazy?" Chester burst out. "I wasn't anywhere near the bar when it happened. I was out in the storeroom, and when I come back I was carrying six candles as long as my arm. And one of 'em was lit. Everybody seen me!"

"You strangled Mr. Suds *before* you went for the candles, during the first flurry of excitement, while Mrs. Suds was at the other end of the bar and George was retrieving the fallen match folder."

"It's a lie!"

"I imagine the motive will become clear once we succeed in deciphering the information contained in that notebook. You erred by not taking *it* along with the cash."

"Nobody knows that code but Art," Chester declared in an ugly voice. "Nobody can read it."

Cora called his bluff. "I can," she interposed. "I figured it out long ago. The first two letters come from the first two letters of the bettor's name and the last letter comes from the first letter of the last name. Your code's 'Cheek' for Chester Kurz."

Chester's face was red. He clenched his fists.

"When the police arrive," Dearborn said, "they will, I am certain, discover that you have on your person or in the cash register a large and unaccountable sum of money."

Chester took a few steps backward.

"I daresay you relied on everyone here to remain circumspect in regard to Mr. Suds' activities. It was shortsighted of you. I'm afraid you also underestimated Mrs. Suds' ability to keep track of her husband's exploits."

Chester's eyes darted around frantically.

"Perhaps what seemed to you like the perfect opportunity presented itself and you acted on impulse. Whatever the reasoning, it was ill-advised, as you are by now all too unhappily aware."

Suddenly Chester whirled and hit the key of the cash register. The

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drawer opened and he reached in to grab a fat roll of bills from one of the compartments. Then he dashed to the far end of the bar, pulled himself up onto the counter, and leaped to the other side.

"Stop him!" Dearborn cried.

Rudy sprang forward. He raced toward the front of the room and dived after the fleeing man, bringing him down just as he pulled the bolt and threw open the door.

"What's going on?" George cried.

"Rudy tackled him," Mr. Crimp shouted. "I'll get the cops!" He dashed toward the struggling men, leaping over their prostrate bodies and throwing back the door bolt.

Then, without warning, the lights flickered, took hold, and flared.

"Lights!" the sausage-curl lady cried.

Overhead, the television crackled and came to life. A voice announced the ten o'clock news.

"An hour," George remarked soberly. "Only an hour."

"A lot's happened in only an hour," Cora said dolefully.

"A lot happened in only a minute," the sausage-curl lady added.

"A second or an eternity depending upon the circumstances," Dearborn murmured, more to himself than to the others, already rehearsing what he would tell Benjamin later.

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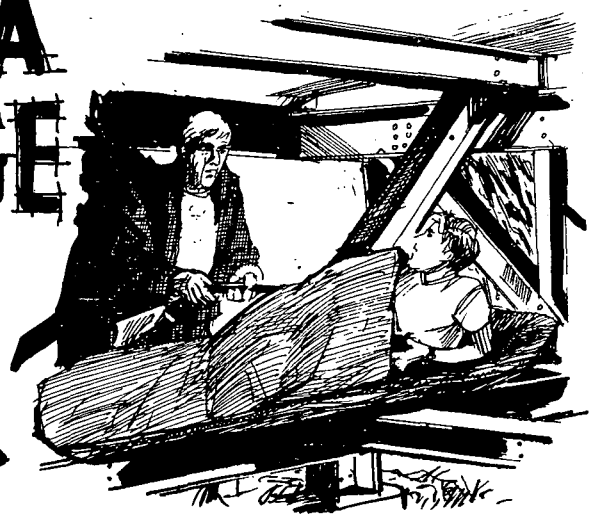
His plan was well worked out . . .

BLUEPRINT FOR A BRIDGE

by ALVIN S. FICK



He was done with running. Three miles of slogging down the stream bed, slipping and falling on the rocks, had not been part of the plan. But it was the only deviation he made. He was holed up now beneath the bridge where he had cached food and a sleeping bag several days before.

He took off the hiking boots with the Vibram soles and wrung out his socks. Above the low chatter of water over the rocks he thought he

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could hear in the distance the sound that had forced him into the stream the nearest to panic he had come—the belling call of bloodhounds riding on the wind. His hands shook a little when he hung the socks over a bridge girder.

By the time his socks were dry he could no longer hear the dogs. Perhaps it was not State Police bloodhounds. After all his precautions, a pursuit with bloodhounds seemed unlikely. It might have been a pack of dogs chasing a deer. Although he knew feral dogs were a hazard to deer primarily in winter and early spring, sometimes they would harass a doe with a fawn in the summer.

His backpack was leaned against the concrete abutment that supported the bridge framework and fanned out on both sides of the bridge to retain the stream bank. Where he sat, his head two feet from the steel that supported the bridge roadbed, grass had crept in and filled a hollow not much larger than his body.

He didn't bother to count the money. During the three days since he entered the woods he had heard several times on his transistor radio that the amount was $46,000. He put the cloth bag containing the money into a heavy plastic bag, then tied it with cord in a niche where two latticed I-beams joined.

Nearly twenty miles of hilly wooded terrain separated him from the Investors Trust branch bank in the suburbs of Bell City where a bank guard was talking to two men from the State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigation.

"Like I told you the day it happened, when I turned all I could see was this turtleneck sweater pulled up to his eyes. Then he lifted a corner of the raincoat he had over his arm. That's when I saw the gun."

"Then he took yours?"

The guard, a grey-haired retired Bell City patrolman, looked at his shoes and didn't answer.

"Damn." BCI Lieutenant Wicklin said the word softly. He was a mild-mannered man, slow of speech and deliberate in action. "There was nothing on the camera monitors to help identify him. Six feet, dark hair. Just your average everyday bank robber."

"You still haven't found his car?" the guard asked without looking up.

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"No—and the roadblocks didn't produce anything. We think he came from the woods in back of the shopping center, robbed the bank, then walked right back into the woods. We searched, but you know how big that wooded area is west of Bell."

"Yeah. He could hide in there ten years and you wouldn't find him."

Wicklin's pale-blue eyes joined the guard's in staring at the shiny black shoes. "He can't spend the money in the woods," he said.

"Maybe he came out of the woods and hitched a ride," the guard said.

"Why do you think we set up roadblocks?" Three days without a lead were beginning to strain even Wicklin's well-known patience.

During the three days in the woods he had walked a circuitous 30-mile route following a topographical map. He stayed away from the farms that bordered the nearly unbroken forest. The hiking he had done in the area for two months prior to the robbery made reference to the map nearly unnecessary. Once he spotted a group of Boy Scouts. He hid and watched them pass on a trail fifty feet away.

He left nothing to chance. He carried the components of a deer bowhunter's tree stand, including camouflage pants and jacket, and slept in trees where he tied himself securely. On the second morning he was awakened by the sound of voices and the movement of people through the undergrowth. Two deputy sheriffs leading a search party passed directly beneath where he sat in a beech tree. He stayed in the tree until noon.

His position beneath the bridge had been chosen during the weeks of planning. From it he could see the highway in both directions as it swept down from the hills to the valley floor. The heavily traveled two-lane blacktop was maintained by the state. Upstream to the north the creek was swallowed up by the wall of woods he had just left. In the other direction the arch of the bridge framed a small white house with green shutters, a faded red barn, and smaller outbuildings whose sagging rooflines spoke of age and neglect.

That had been the most critical part of his plan. During the time he studied the area he made careful inquires about the man who lived in the house. In spite of this he hadn't been able to learn much about the old recluse. He watched the old man during his infrequent shopping trips, determining that he lived alone. Once he lay in dense brush

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where the shaggy field adjacent to the house sloped down to the creek, listening to a conversation between the white-headed old man and the rural mail carrier whose occasional stop at the roadside box seemed to be a social event for both of them. Everything added to his unshakable conviction that the old man and his rusty pickup truck were essential to his plan.

He would stay beneath the bridge for a few days, at least until the police assumed he had left the area. Although the bank robbery gave him no qualms of conscience, taking care of the old man and stealing his truck was another matter. He began to see how a hardened criminal would have a decided advantage over an amateur—especially over one like himself who had never gotten so much as a parking ticket in his life.

The man put the thought from his mind. Everything had gone smoothly and it would continue to as long as he followed the plan. He opened a packet of dehydrated beef and vegetable soup, then added water from a plastic bottle to a small aluminum kettle, which he put to heat on a tiny alcohol stove. When the mixture began to boil he put in a handful of oatmeal to add body.

For the first couple of days after the bank holdup the roads were heavily patrolled by State Police and Sheriff's Department cars. On his first night under the bridge—the traffic kept him awake until it tapered off after midnight—he was roused from sleep by voices directly overhead. He slid his hand down inside the sleeping bag and withdrew the gun. He could see the flashing light shining on the trees. The girders caught some of the white of the headlights. The revolving bubble lights on the top of the patrol car reflected off the surface of the water like many-faceted rubies.

The troopers were talking to a hitchhiker. They finally put the man into the car and drove away. It was an hour before he fell asleep again.

Early every Sunday morning old J. C. MacGlinn followed a routine as unswerving as his determination to visit the islands of his youth. First he went out to the hen yard where the chickens clucked around him while he poured laying mash into the hoppers. Then, in season, after checking the bridge, he would stroll up a feeder brook to pick watercress.

He was as faithful in his Sunday visits as the most devout church-

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goer, and each time he went down the bank to inspect the bridge—his bridge—it was with an engineer's respect for design and function that bordered on reverence.

As always, on this Sunday he inspected the bridge carefully, touching where he could reach, standing in the center of the stream bed in his rubber boots, looking up at the arched steel overhead. He knew the location of each weld, rivet, and bolt. He still remembered the stresses and the complex mathematical formulas over which he had labored when he designed the bridge and guided its construction 37 years before.

This Sunday he had reason to conduct his survey with extra care, even stealth.

It was 5:45 and the only sound above the chuckling of the broad shallow stream over the rocks was the early-summer-morning matins of the birds. The sun, a handspan above the horizon, cast elongated shadows of the bridge on the streambed. The water reflected the light upward on the girders, heightening the similarity of the bridge to the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral.

It had been one of the happiest days of his life when he and his wife sat in the lawyer's office for the closing when the 15-acre farm adjacent to the bridge became theirs. Caroline, his wife, had not shared fully in his enthusiasm, mainly because of the heavy traffic on the road. But she was an understanding woman who knew instinctively that her husband's desire to live his retirement years close to the greatest achievement of his career was essential to their future happiness.

The small flock of chickens and a vegetable garden were her delight, so much so that her husband kept both after her death. The wasting sickness that drained their savings finally swept her away after three years.

It was during the following seven years of loneliness that he had become obsessed with a desire to see again the Pacific islands that had fascinated him during his years as a gunnery officer on a destroyer during World War Two. Place names like Kwajalein, Majuro, Ulithi, Ponape, Palau, Saipan, and Tinian flowed through his memory and churned his imagination until gradually his dream filled the void created by his wife's death.

He tried to save enough money from his small pension and Social

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Security checks to make a trip to the islands. The living-room sofa and dining-room table were buried under piles of travel brochures.

As his fund grew and gave him hope, he found books in the Bell City library that limned that great ocean's paradises in such brilliance that it was not enough to borrow the books; he had to own them.

More money went for subscriptions to periodicals just for the occasional articles they published that helped him to add details to his dream, and the purchase of back issues of magazines added to the drain. So that after seven years, while the dream was more vivid and palpable than ever, its attainment receded further from his grasp.

He got rid of the telephone. He shut off the furnace and heated two rooms with a wood stove. He bought plans for a home-built ocean-going vessel, and had even purchased supplies and started construction. He got no further than the keel and half the rib-framing when he realized he would die of old age before he finished the boat.

The materials he purchased had wiped out the rest of his savings. He was working late one night in the barn when the realization came to him that the venture with the boat was an exercise in self-delusion. Arthritis in his hands and shoulders had made the work slower and increasingly painful. He looked around the barn floor where his tools lay among the wood shavings and it seemed to him that he was no more than a small boy leaving his toys on the playroom floor.

When he turned off the lights and opened the door to leave, a full moon shone on the framework of the boat, giving it the appearance of the bleached skeleton of a beached whale. That was the last time he worked on the boat.

That night he went into the house and sat at the kitchen table rereading for the third time Robert Manry's book, *Tinkerbelle*. When he went to bed he was convinced that his only error had been one of dimension rather than of practicality; he had started to build too large a boat. After all, Manry had crossed the Atlantic in a boat only 13½ feet long.

MacGlinn stood in the middle of the stream, the water washing around his boots, pressing the cool rubber against his feet and shins. He was a short man whose body had reversed the usual aging pattern. Over the years he had gone from a broad pudginess in youth to a squat and bony spareness at seventy. His eyes were dark brown and peered

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out from a white thatch of eyebrows that met over the bridge of his nose in an unbroken line, a continuous awning of shaggy hair.

There was a double-barreled 12-gauge Remington shotgun in the crook of his arm. He had discovered the food cache and the sleeping bag during the previous Sunday's inspection.

At first he had been angry that someone was trespassing beneath his bridge, but gradually resentment gave way to curiosity. He examined the cache, and even opened the sleeping bag, then carefully returned everything to its original state. He found no identification. There was no name in the two books rolled up in the sleeping bag.

From where stood he saw a spot of white at the juncture of an I-beam and a brace near the east end of the bridge where he had found the cache. It had not been there a week ago. When he got closer to the bank of the stream he could see it was something tied to the girder.

MacGlinn again felt a growing proprietary resentment when he climbed the grassy bank at the left of the bridge abutment. He stood for a moment at the edge of the small hollow, letting his eyes adjust to the dimmer light under the bridge end.

He watched the gentle rise and fall of the sleeping bag. It seemed a shame to disturb such peaceful slumber. At last he nudged the form with the muzzle of the shotgun. The figure rolled over slowly.

"What are you doing under my bridge?" MacGlinn said.

"Your bridge? *Your* bridge?"

"You might say that."

"Please take that gun out of my ribs."

"I will if you slide both hands out of your bedroll."

"I could shoot you. I have an automatic pointed at your belt buckle, old man."

MacGlinn chuckled. "Let's call it a Mexican standoff, although my shotgun would make a much bigger hole than your gun."

The man in the sleeping bag brought out both hands, and sat up. He pressed a catch on the automatic, letting the clip fall into his left hand. He put the clip into his shirt pocket, then pushed aside the barrel of the shotgun with his gun hand.

"Now it's your turn," he said.

MacGlinn reached into a pocket of his faded denim jacket and withdrew two shells. "Not loaded," he said, watching the face of the man.

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He expected to see an expression that said: I'll laugh for you now but I'll kick myself later. But the smile that crossed the tanned face revealed even white teeth, nothing more.

The man ran his hand through tousled black hair streaked with grey. He looked about forty-five. He was wearing a white T-shirt.

"It's a little cool and damp here by the creek." He spoke while he pulled on a sweatshirt that was rolled and had served as a pillow. "I'm hiking to Massachusetts. I catch a ride now and then. That's why I carry the gun. I have a permit for it. People don't realize most hitchhikers are in greater danger than the folks who give them rides. Hitchhikers have a bad name they don't deserve."

"That's so. But you better be careful when you cross the line into Massachusetts with that automatic. They have a gun law there with fangs a foot long. They put people who tote guns away for a year."

MacGlinn switched the shotgun to the other arm. "How did you sleep last night?" he said.

"Good—after midnight. Before that the traffic was so heavy I couldn't. I'm glad the truck traffic is light on Saturday night. I'm still a little sleepy."

"Been traveling long?"

"A couple of weeks. I've been taking my time. Yesterday was a good one. I made just over two hundred miles in three rides. Usually I hike at least ten miles a day to keep in shape."

"Got in last evening, then?"

"About a half hour before dark. I spotted the bridge from way off while I was walking down into the valley. Bridges make good places to sleep—if you can stand the noise. I was tempted to ask if I could sleep in your barn, but most people are touchy about that."

"I suppose." MacGlinn pointed the gun barrel toward his house, framed by the bridge arch. The early sun tinted the white clapboards with a faint haze of pink. "Come on along. A pot of coffee will chirk you up."

The man stood up, stepping down the embankment from the hollow and slipping the automatic into his pocket.

"You won't need that." MacGlinn looked at him with annoyance.

"No, of course not." He bent down and slid the gun inside the sleeping bag. When he straightened up he held out his hand. "My name's Jessup. Barry Jessup."

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"I'm J. C. MacGlinn." They shook hands.

"I know. I saw your name on the mailbox yesterday."

"There's a spot downstream where the boulders are big enough and close enough so you can cross without getting your feet wet." MacGlinn watched the man put on his socks and shoes.

They went into the house through the kitchen door, which faced the back yard. The pickup truck was parked behind the house.

MacGlinn pushed a couple of magazines and the book *Tinkerbelle* to one side on the kitchen table. "If you'd like to wash up, the bathroom is down the hall." He pointed.

While the old man fried scrambled eggs and sausage, his guest strolled around the room looking at the pictures. Even the cabinet doors were covered and showed dusky women bathing at the foot of milky waterfalls, idyllic scenes, and people suspended forever in time through the artistry of photographer Eliot Elisofon.

While they ate the man said, "You traveled a lot?"

"Not lately. You mean the pictures? I was in the Pacific during World War Two." He divided his eggs in two piles, pushing them apart. Then he placed a sausage to connect the two piles. There was no mistaking it for anything other than a bridge.

The man stared at MacGlinn's plate. "You said something about the bridge when you woke me up."

MacGlinn inhaled the coffee as he looked at the man over the rim of his cup. He put the cup down, then picked up his fork and carefully dismantled the egg-and-sausage structure on his plate.

"The bridge," he said between mouthfuls. "I built the bridge, I mean, I designed it. I was the chief engineer. I guess it's the one thing I've done that I'm proudest of. It's a good bridge—" His voice trailed off. He looked out the window toward the road. His chair at the kitchen table was placed so he could see the steel of the structure outlined against the green of the woods and the blue dome of sky.

"Yes. Even I could see it's a fine bridge." Jessup finished his coffee.

"Care to sit a while before you go?"

"Thank you. I would like to look at some of the pictures in the living room if you don't mind. And might that be a blueprint of the bridge you have on the far wall?"

J. C. MacGlinn's seamed face looked as if it had been lighted from within. "Sure," he said. "Go ahead. . ."

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They spent the next two hours in animated conversation about the bridge, and discussing the books and pictures of the South Pacific lining the walls. The tall man in the sweatshirt was a good listener. He sensed that living alone provided the old man with a dammed-up reservoir of information.

They had gone out to look at the boat framework in the barn when Jessup made up his mind.

MacGlinn was standing close to the boat frame, his hands running down the smooth surface of an ash rib. "Come with me," Jessup said.

The white-haired man turned slowly.

"I inherited some money a while back," Jessup went on. "I've been planning to spend it on travel ever since my wife died. I'm alone too. I have enough for us to visit those islands you want to see again."

MacGlinn looked at his boots, then up at Jessup.

"How about it? We can drive to Great Barrington. That's just over the line. There's a small airport there where we can charter a plane for New York, then fly to San Francisco. From there we can go by ship. You'd like that, wouldn't you? Maybe out among the islands we can rent a boat and hire a couple of natives to sail us to the small atolls." There was warmth and animation in his eyes and voice.

As they walked the dirt path from the barn to the house MacGlinn said. "Why would you want to take an old man along?"

"I'm not doing you the big favor you might think. I'm living as lonesome a life as I think you are. Besides, going to the islands isn't that much out of my way. My real goal is New Zealand, where I have a cousin and where I've wanted to live since the first time I found it on a globe when I was in the fifth grade."

"You want that pretty bad, do you?" MacGlinn said.

"Very much. As much as you want to see those islands again." He stared out the window at the pickup truck. "Maybe more," he added.

"Enough to rob a bank?" MacGlinn's voice was casual.

Jessup turned from the window and looked at MacGlinn. His gaze did not falter. He started to answer when the sound of wheels on the gravel driveway came through the open window.

"That's my nephew, Tom Wicklin. He stops by every Sunday on his way home from church. Gives me the news—just checks to see how I'm doing. Maybe you noticed I don't have a radio or TV. And there's nothing in the newspapers worth knowing. . ."

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When the car had driven away and MacGlinn came back into the house, he found the man in the sweatshirt standing in the center of the living room with the shotgun.

"You knew all along," Jessup said.

"Yes. I found your food cache and sleeping bag a week ago. And I saw the two books about New Zealand in your bedroll. At least you didn't lie about that. Then during the week my nephew Tom stopped in to tell me about the bank. Told me to be on the lookout for hitchhikers—strangers. He's an investigator with the State Police. I guess you have the money in that plastic bag tied to the girder. It wasn't there a week ago."

"Why didn't you tell him about me just now?"

"I figured you might cut loose and he'd get hurt."

"That's all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Maybe—but I don't think you lie any better than I do." He paused. "You're alone too. Come along with me."

"I want to, but I can't."

"Why not? You have no ties."

"Yes, I do. Just one."

The old man walked to the window and looked out at the bridge.

"You leave me no choice." The shotgun swung around. "No matter how I tie you, you might get loose. And if you didn't get loose I don't relish leaving you with no food or water. Shooting is better than that."

"I suppose so." J. C. MacGlinn held out his hands, palms up. "So go ahead."

Jessup walked slowly toward him. He shook his head. "You know I can't do it," he said. He handed the gun to MacGlinn.

"I was pretty sure you couldn't." The old man grinned. "And now it's all over."

"I guess it is. But it's no worse for me not to get to New Zealand than for you not to get to the islands." There was resignation in Jessup's slumped shoulders. "Stealing is one thing, killing's another," he said. "Of course, you can shoot me and take the money. Bury me in back of the barn and no one will know I existed. Or maybe there's a reward if killing me would bother you."

"It wouldn't bother me as much as leaving my bridge. My nephew told me this morning he just learned the state is widening the road to

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four lanes. That means the bridge will be torn down for a wider one. I can't leave before—" His voice grew husky and low.

"I'm sorry." Jessup reached out and touched the old man's shoulder.

MacGlinn turned away, then walked to a closet by the front door. He opened the shotgun, extracted the shells, and put the gun on a shelf. He blew his nose noisily into a red bandanna. It was a long time before he turned back to Jessup, and when he did he was smiling.

"I can't kill your dream any more than you could kill me. If you kill a man's dream you might as well kill him too."

Jessup stood there, slack-jawed and speechless.

"Don't just stand there. Go get your things from under the bridge. It's a two-hour drive to Great Barrington." He waved his hand. "Go."

As Jessup reached the kitchen door MacGlinn called after him. "When you get to New Zealand, send me your address. My nephew says when they widen the road they'll want this place for a good price. I may drop in on you when I'm in the Pacific."

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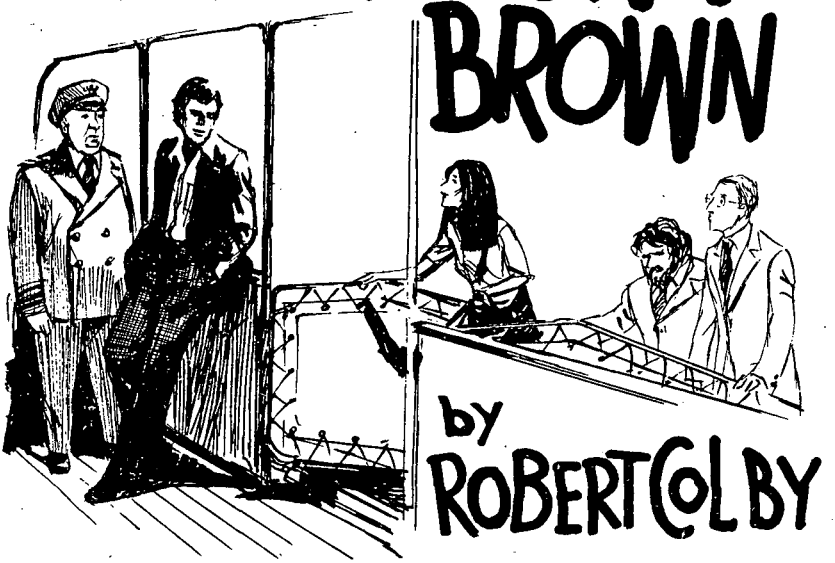
Here's double trouble for our man Brock. . . .

PAINT THE TOWN BROWN



by ROBERT COLBY

Brock arrived at the San Pedro berth of the *Sunland Queen* an hour before it was to sail, at ten on a brilliant morning in May. His baggage checked aboard, he stood on the dock, happily contemplating the preparations for departure. A wiry ageless man, his eyes seemed perpetually sparked with wonder.

Now, as he gazed around the cruise ship, his expression was one of positive enchantment. The *Sunland Queen* seemed like an enormous

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yacht to Brock. Glistening white, sleek, and lean, it promised speedy and luxurious transport to exotic adventures in distant ports.

He joined a knot of passengers at the entrance to the gangway and climbed to the deck above, posting himself directly over the gangway so that he could observe the passengers embarking. In less than ten minutes he spotted the three coming aboard. The young girl, Wendy McNair, pretending to be alone, was well in the lead. The two men, Dolf Harmon and Kirk Gellus, followed a few seconds later.

Wendy was dark-haired and dainty, with the wide-eyed innocence of certain college girls whose bland faces appeared untouched by even the hint of an evil thought. She was well chosen, perfectly cast as the mule, the carrier. Harmon was a big fellow with a small trim beard. He was a bit pudgy and jovial, and given to much smiling, though his eyes, watchful and sly, never quite joined in the fun. Gellus was tall and slim and narrow-bodied. He wore steel-rimmed glasses, had a long solemn face, and a mild studious manner. Both men were probably in their mid-thirties, a good ten years older than Wendy.

These three and their design for self-enrichment provided the impetus for Brock's hasty decision to sail aboard the *Sunland Queen*. Though a cruise to Puerto Vallarta, with another stop at Acapulco, held other rewards. And any profit he collected would be a bonus.

The manner in which he discovered the plan of the trio was accidental. He had been playing his eternal game of collecting a tax on the evils of mankind, and was ensconced in one of Manhattan's shabbier hotel rooms. He had concluded his business with a sizeable take and was packing to move on when he heard the sound of a shot—muffled but unmistakable. It came from the adjoining room on his left and, out of a robust curiosity concerning any hint of a crime from which he might profit, he quickly unloosed his kit of pocket tools and drilled two tiny holes in the wall. Into these invisible punctures he inserted his peep-and-listen device, his eye to the wide-angle lens, an audio plug in his ear.

That was when he got his first look at the two men and the girl. She was seated in a chair, nervously fingering an automatic pistol and wearing a look of lip-chewing chagrin, her eyes fearfully tilted up to Dolf Harmon, who stood gazing down at her, his arms folded across his abundant chest, his expression the zenith of chauvanistic disdain. But

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then abruptly he grinned and began to laugh in raucous delight, really tickled by the absurdity of the scene. She had apparently discharged the gun into the sway-backed mattress of the king-sized bed that dominated the room.

As Brock watched, Dolf stretched his hand for the weapon and she passed it to him meekly. Smiling, he removed the ammunition clip from the automatic, tucked it into a pocket, and set the gun gently on a table. Abruptly his smile vanished. He reached down and caught her by the long strands of her polished ebony hair and gave her a few wicked backhand swipes across the face.

Wendy's eyes spilled over and her sobs filled the room. Meanwhile, Kirk Gellus, down on his knees by the bed, had found the spent bullet and was examining it studiously through his thick spectacles.

When nobody hammered on the door and it appeared that the shot from the .38 automatic had gone undetected, Dolf forgave Wendy, bending to kiss her wetly. She stopped crying, and a bottle of whiskey was produced and passed from lip to lip. Then the three settled down to an earnest discussion of their plan. Which was to board the *Sunland Queen* in San Pedro a week later. During the ship's three-day pause in Puerto Vallarta, Harmon and Gellus would rendezvous with a couple of natives who had a quantity of heroin, known as Mexican Brown.

Although certain members of the fraternity sneered at anything but the pure white heroin smuggled in from Europe, fifty thousand dollars' worth of Mexican Brown would bring a handsome profit when cut for the street pushers. So Dolf and Kirk, aided by Wendy, planned to smuggle the stuff in and dust the town with it.

Since Wendy didn't have a record, she was to be the mule. Secreting the junk beneath her clothing in the pockets of belts strapped to her body, she should have no trouble with the customs inspectors, plagued as they would be by the need to check the hundreds of passengers disembarking from a cruise to Mexico. Arriving in San Pedro from New York, she was to detach herself from the two men and never be seen in their company, Though, of course, they would sneak her the Brown in Puerto Vallarta so that she could slip it aboard.

When the trio left the room to go to the coffee shop for breakfast, Brock sank into a chair to consider the matter. Immediately he decided that when the gods delivered such a windfall it was bad luck and ungrateful to ignore it.

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He had a personal thing about the sale of hard drugs. And fifty thousand dollars was a cheerful sum of money. He undid the lock of the room next door and went through the suitcases of the unwholesome three. From letters and receipts he got their names and little else outside of the fact that Wendy came to New York from a small town in Ohio. After a glance at their tired belongings Brock was certain that they could never come up with fifty grand on their own. They must have a sponsor who was furnishing the cash.

Wendy had a cabin to herself, Brock learned by a perusal of the passenger list. Harmon and Gellus were situated together on the same deck. Brock's stateroom was on the promenade deck amidships—a prime location, and costly.

He went to the cabin and found it large and luxurious. His luggage had been delivered and he unpacked it and went out on deck. Soon the all-ashore warning was sounded and the *Sunland Queen* departed with the standard hoopla—a band playing furiously, the ship's whistle blasting, and confetti and streamers showering down upon the frantic wavers crowding the dock below.

When the ship was out to sea, Brock strolled the promenade deck in search of a vacant chair, rounding the deck forward to try the port side. Just then a stocky, ginger-haired man with a brush-cut moustache and an air of extreme preoccupation arose from his chair and moved off quickly. He seemed unaware that he had almost collided with Brock, who recognized him instantly as Ryan Foster Garrett, owner of a string of hotels and other holdings. He had recently been pictured in *Time* and *Newsweek* when one of his horses, entered in the Kentucky Derby, was rated as the top contender.

As it turned out, Garrett had been sitting next to his wife Valerie, a beauty queen who had failed as an actress, and so before taking the empty chair Brock said, "Do you mind if I sit here, Mrs. Garrett?"

She was reading a magazine and upon hearing her name she looked up with a tentative smile. She had chestnut hair enveloping an oval face that fell just short of perfection because of a nose that was a bit too long and slightly ridged. Her almond-shaped eyes had an oriental look.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

Brock shook his head. "I recognized you and your husband from news photos."

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"Oh."

"I don't want to take your husband's chair if he's coming back," Brock continued.

"Go ahead," she said. "He went to our stateroom to phone his office." She made a face. "He'll be gone at least an hour." With a gesture she invited Brock to sit.

"You would think," she sighed, "that on a cruise—" She shrugged. "But Ryan is a lamb when you can pry him away from the office—or the phone. Isn't it simply awful that you can't escape phones?" She fastened Brock with her electric-brown eyes. "What's your name?"

"T. C. Brock. Just call me Brock."

"And I'm Valerie."

After a moment's reflection, she said, "Don't you find that there's a kind of esprit de corps when you're on a cruise—as if we're all one big happy family? I love talking to new people. One of the penalties of living a sheltered life is that one is entombed with other sheltered people. Most of us haven't very much to say to each other. I find it stifling."

"I suppose that's true," Brock answered. "I'm afraid my experience in that regard is limited. But given a little time and lots of money, I think I could learn to endure the penalties."

She laughed. "Since you're not suffering the agonies of the rich, Mr. Brock, how do you earn your living?"

"Well, I always find that a rather difficult question to answer."

"You do? Why?"

"Because my work is secret and there's not much I can reveal about it. You might say that I investigate certain events and collect a kind of tax on them."

She frowned. "You mean, if a casino in Vegas were skimming a part of the take to avoid taxes you would be sent to investigate?"

He smiled. "For the lack of a better example that'll do."

"You work for the government then?"

"No. I can't afford to work for peanuts."

At that moment Ryan Garrett appeared, wearing a harried expression.

"Darling!" said Valerie. "I gave this gentleman your chair because I thought you'd be gone a while."

Garrett nodded. "Quite right, dear," he said. "But some imbecile

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fumbled that conference call to Chicago and New York and it'll take another half hour to get through."

Brock stood. "I was just leaving for a tour of the ship," he lied.

"This is Mr. Brock," said Valerie. "He works for the government, or something, I'm not quite sure."

Garrett chuckled and shook hands. "I could tell you some things about the government that might surprise you," he said. "But I'd much rather talk horses. Do you like horses, Mr. Brock?"

"I like yours to win the Derby, Mr. Garrett."

"Yeah? Well, come back in a while and we'll discuss it over a drink."

"I'll do that," said Brock. He smiled at Valerie, who sent him a wink, and moved off. Garrett was just making polite noises. His affable manner had invited friendship, but his eyes were rejecting. Brock had no intention of returning for a drink with him.

Late in the afternoon he spied Wendy McNair hunched over a lonely cocktail in a remote corner of the Crow's Nest Bar. She looked lost. At dinner, she was seated dejectedly with some senior citizens, her eyes aimed at Harmon and Gellus across the room at a merry table of young people, mostly female. The Garretts were seated at the captain's table.

The Pacific was calm all the way. The *Sunland Queen* rolled and pitched in a gentle lulling rhythm. Only a few, mostly those with massive hangovers, were sick. A moderate drinker and an old sailor who slept profoundly in the rocking cradle of the sea, Brock was in fine shape when the ship dropped anchor in the harbor at Puerto Vallarta. The usual Mexican cruise comprised three ports with very brief stops at each. But under a trial plan, the *Sunland* was to spend three days in Vallarta, then plow on for another three in Acapulco before returning home.

Brock did not go ashore but waited on deck for Harmon and Gellus to appear. Also waiting on deck for her husband to complete one of his radio-phone calls was Valerie Garrett. "He shouldn't be over a couple of hours this time," she told Brock dryly.

"Will you be staying at the Posada?" Brock asked her.

"No, we've got a luscious suite aboard—it's huge—so we'll come back to the ship at night."

Brock had seen Harmon and Gellus. They were lining up for the

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shore boat. Far back from them but preparing to take the same boat was Wendy McNair. Brock made it just in time. He was among the last to squeeze into the boat before the line was roped off for the next trip.

When they reached the long quay jutting out into the crescent bay, Harmon and Gellus, moving leisurely, walked the short distance to Avenida Diaz Ordaz, a quaint cobblestone street skirting the bay, and headed for the center of town. Wendy was lagging a safe distance behind, and Brock trailed them, enjoying the tropic feel of the sultry day, the placid emerald of the water at the edge of the beach, and the lush green hills above Puerto Vallarta, which reminded him of a Greek village dozing in the afternoon sun.

The hike to the center of town was not much. There, the two men entered a car rental agency and Wendy vanished inside a white stucco beachside hotel, the Rosita. In a few minutes Harmon and Gellus took possession of a gold Datsun two-door and drove off in it. Brock hustled toward a taxi at the curb, ready to give chase. But the Datsun halted a block away near the plaza, and the pair entered a low rambling hotel of ancient vintage, El Oceano. Passing it, Brock saw them at a window table in the bar, doubtless waiting for some contact who would lead them to the Mexican Brown. Or perhaps just killing time until the hour of a rendezvous at some secret place to which they would drive in the rented Datsun.

Brock circled El Oceano and made his way to the car agency. He rented a Ford Pinto and parked it where he could watch the Datsun, the Oceano, and the Rosita through his binoculars.

Time hobbled along and nothing happened. The two men remained seated in the El Oceano bar, hoisting what appeared to be outsized Margaritas. And unless Wendy stole away by way of the beach fronting the Rosita, she was still in the hotel.

Though the afternoon was on the wane, the air was torpid and hot—close to ninety, Brock figured. In a while, he climbed out of the Pinto and ambled half a block before returning to sit on a retaining wall over the sands.

Excluding such rare exceptions as the Camino Real, a high-rise hotel to the south at the edge of the bay, most of the buildings were not more than two or three stories. Composed of white stucco with red roofs of ceramic title, they hugged a web of cobblestone streets divided

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by a river at midway, where they ascended in tiers for half a dozen blocks before they were halted abuptly by the mountains.

Puerto Vallarta was still unspoiled, thought Brock, uncommercial compared to the usual tourist traps. Also, it was anti-haste and anti-progress, a holdover from another time when there was tranquility and charm.

Reluctantly, he went back to the car. The sun lowered and faded into twilight, departing in a soft blaze of amber and magenta. A deep-blue chauffeured limousine, aging but unblemished and lovingly polished, slid by and braked before an Americanized restaurant labled: CARLOS O'BRIAN'S. As Brock fixed them in his binoculars, Ryan Garrett and his wife alighted. Both were casually dressed, Ryan in the same costume of blue pullover, white slacks, and sneakers he had worn on board and Valerie in a long black skirt and a white blouse.

When they were swallowed inside O'Brian's, the Mexican chauffeur of the limousine rolled a cigarette with care, then lighted it, and, leaning cross-legged against a fender with his cap tilted back, smoked it with an air of somber reflection.

Soft lights had sprung up everywhere and the town glimmered in the mellow darkness. A few people strolled the walks and taxis wheeled over the cobblestone streets, but slowly, softly, in keeping with the pace of the climate. While out in the harbor the *Sunland Queen* was dressed for evening—a great gleaming jewel against the black velvet of the sea.

A breeze, mildly spiced with brine and tropic fragrance, wafted in from the ocean. It tussled with the fronds of slender palms sprouting from the sands. It whispered along the streets of the town, over which there was a hush that was charged with an indefinable expectancy.

Just after dark, set in motion perhaps by a phone call or the prearranged hour of a meeting, Dolf Harmon and Kirk Gellus stepped out of El Oceano, climbed into the Datsun, and drove off. Brock tailed them from a considerable distance. The Datsun turned off Avenida Diaz Ordaz and took the road to the airport, passing it and all other outposts of civilization as the narrow highway dipped and rose and wound its way inland through a desolate jungle of palms and tropic vegetation.

When they came to the entrance of the airport, Brock wheeled into it so that if the pair were watching through their rearview mirror, they

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would see his headlights veer off to the port and relax their vigil. However, he simply made a swift U-turn and continued the chase with his lights out.

After a few minutes the Datsun's brake-lights flickered and Brock slowed as it swung to the right off the highway and vanished. He guessed that Harmon and Gellus had received a signal or they had been to the same location on a previous trip. By now they too were driving without lights. Fortunately the sky was clear and a partial moon beamed enough radiance so that he could distinguish shadowed objects with his binoculars.

He was about a quarter of a mile behind them when the Datsun had angled right and disappeared. He pulled up on the shoulder, silenced his motor, and climbed out with his binoculars. Panning the glasses over the jungle below, he hunted for a side road or a trail or an opening through the trees, but he could find nothing.

Adjusting the focus, he began again, traversing slowly, pausing to examine certain patches and then moving on. At last he caught the gleam of something and, tightening upon it, uncovered a headlight peering from the foliage. Apparently the Datsun had been maneuvered so that it was in position to make an easy exit, and perhaps a fast one.

He eased the Pinto up to the point where the Datsun was concealed. There wasn't a side road, a trail, or even a path, just the tire depressions where the car had nosed down a long shallow embankment to the tree line. But at the point of departure there was a large, oddly shaped boulder. A marker?

He locked the rental car and walked down the weed-covered embankment. It looked soft but was surprisingly firm beneath his feet. Arriving at the Datsun he slipped around it and continued cautiously into the trees. A narrow path through a tangle of jungle growth became visible and he followed it.

Soon he came to a small clearing and in the pale wash of moonlight saw a hut. It was a crudely built, flimsy structure that might have been composed of portable sections that could be quickly thrown together anywhere for any purpose. Brock wondered if it was a lookout post guarding a hideaway.

The door of the hut and a single window faced him. The window was sealed from inside by a square of wood, though the closure was imperfect and allowed a feeble light to escape. He inspected the hut from a

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careful distance to be certain that a guard hadn't been stationed, then closed in with his miniature kit of tools. He drilled the tiny holes without sound and inserted his peep-and-listen device. Then he set the audio plug in his ear and fastened his eye to the viewing lens.

Except for a primitive bullfight tapestry covering a portion of one wall and a crude table with benches, the room was bare. A couple of electric lanterns lit the table, around which were Harmon and Gellus, their backs to Brock—and, facing them, two Mexicans who were so similar they could have been father and son. Both had craggy arcane faces—stony and inscrutable. A .45 automatic rested in front of the elder.

A leather bag was on the table and from it Dolf Harmon lifted small bags of clear heavy plastic which appeared to contain the Mexican Brown they had come to buy. He touched a speck from each bag to his tongue and then performed what seemed to be a chemical test, though his back screened the process from Brock's view. Meanwhile, Kirk Gellus was weighing the plastic bags on a small scale.

Once, looking up from his task at the old man, Harmon said with a twist of a smile, "Why the hardware, amigo? Don't you trust us? "

"I trust no one," said the man in a softly contained voice nearly free of accent. "Only money. And gold, and diamonds, maybe, when they are of great purity. These do not lie or steal, or murder when the back is turned. Their smiles of friendship are true, and in trouble they are more reliable than friends or family, who might turn and flee."

The younger man nodded slightly, in assent or deference, and said to Harmon, "You have brought the cash? Fifty thousand U.S. dollars?"

Harmon chuckled derisively. "Of course, amigo. Would I come halfway across the world to buy the heavy from you without it?"

The young man shrugged. "I believe what I see, and I see nothing. Your mouth has spoken, now let your money speak as well."

Harmon stood abruptly and reached toward his waist. Instantly, the old man grabbed for the pistol and began to raise it, lowering it to the table when Harmon merely hiked his shirt, undid a money belt girdling his middle, and slapped it down on the table. "There," he said. "Ten packets of hundreds, five grand in each."

"You guys," said Gellus, looking up from the scale, "mustn't have a very high regard for Americans. Listen, we're businessmen, not hoods."

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The young man ignored him. Removing the packets of bills from the belt, he began to count them, scrutinizing each one to be sure that it was genuine, while the old man sat in silence, not once taking his eyes from Harmon and Gellus. Finished and apparently satisfied, the young Mexican said something in Spanish to the older one, then returned the bills to the belt and sat waiting with his arms folded across his chest.

The testing and weighing of the heroin completed, Harmon said, "Not bad. It's pretty good for Mexican Brown, and it seems to be all here." Carefully he arranged the plastic sacks in the bag, secured it, and, looping the shoulder strap over his head, adjusted the bag so that it hung at his side.

He grinned. "Well, you got the money and we got the heavy, and that's it for this trip." He stood, as did Gellus. "So long, amigos." Harmon offered his hand, but the old man had given his to the butt of the .45 on the table and the young one kept his arms folded across his chest in denial.

"What about the scale and all?" said Gellus. "You want to take it back with us?"

"No," said Harmon. "We got enough to lug as it is. Leave it." He turned and moved toward the door, Gellus at his side.

They had taken no more than three steps when Harmon said something inaudible that proved to be a signal. Both men whirled about with such percise speed that it must have been practiced for hours. Each already had a weapon in his fist, aiming it straight-arm and firing it repeatedly in the same motion.

The old man was hoisting the Colt pistol when one bullet tore a gushing hole in his throat and another slammed his chest. With a mortal sigh he sagged and fell sideways to the floor. The young Mexican died with his arms still folded, slumping over the table, his head resting upon it as if in sleep.

But even as the shots were fired in such rapid succession they were almost as one, they were overwhelmed by two heavier sounds with no visible cause. As Brock peered through his lens in astonishment, Harmon and Gellus staggered back, slowly collapsed, and sank bloodily to the floor.

At that moment a door that was concealed behind the tapestry in a dummy wall burst open and a small bone-thin Mexican with a wisp of a moustache bounced into the room, toting a double-barreled sawed-off

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shotgun. He had broken the weapon and as he advanced toward the bodies on the floor he plucked the spent shells from the gun, and, dropping them at his feet, produced fresh ones from his jeans.

Gellus was obviously dead but Harmon twitched and moaned and clutched his belly. The Mexican smiled a deadly smile and began to reload his shotgun. And that was when Brock snatched his .38 revolver from a holster under his jacket and loped around to the door of the hut. Finding it unlocked, he opened it. The Mexican had finished loading his weapon and was preparing to fire it directly into Harmon's terrified face. "Freeze right there, ole buddy," Brock ordered from the doorway.

Turning his head, the gunman nodded and stooped to place his shotgun on the floor, then whipped around and fired. But Brock fell prone when the pellets winged through the doorway above him. The gunman was lowering his weapon to fire a second round when Brock shot him precisely and repeatedly until he sank to his knees and tumbled forward.

"Help me," Harmon gasped as Brock squatted beside him, examining the awful wound. But Brock shook his head and said, "I'm sorry, friend."

"Help me, please help me," Harmon begged in a more feeble voice before his eyes glazed over.

Brock scooped the money belt from the table and, lifting his shirt, fastened it around his waist. As an afterthought, he relieved Harmon of the bag, strapping it over his own shoulder. At the door he stood for a moment looking back and shaking his head. "Poor damn fools," he murmured. Then he went out into the night jungle.

There was a fishing pier close by the Rosita. It was deserted at that hour and Brock made his way to the end of it. There he opened each of the plastic bags and emptied them into the Pacific.

At the desk of the Rosita he learned that Wendy McNair had taken a room. He called her on the house phone. "My name is Brock," he said. "I have a message from Dolf and Kirk. I'm in the lobby. May I come up?"

She had taken a quick breath of surprise and for a space she was silent. "All right, come along," she said nervously, and gave him the room number.

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She answered his knock with a guarded expression. Her hair was in disarray and her eyes were glassy; he guessed that she had been drinking.

"Who are you?" she asked, blocking the doorway.

"I told you."

"Yeah, but where do you fit in?"

"I'm a contact they wouldn't have told you about, Wendy. I work for the Man and I flew in to check if it went the way he set it up."

She nodded slowly. "O.K. But who *is* the Man? They never would tell me, if they knew."

"Are you going to let me in, Wendy?"

She stepped aside. It was a good-sized room on the ocean with a pair of double beds. She led him out to a terrace overlooking the beach and waved him to a chair beside a table where there was a bottle of tequila, wedges of lime on a saucer, and some mix.

"Flop down, have a drink," she said.

He declined the drink and the chair and leaned against the railing. "I can't stay long; your boys fouled up and I've got some heavy cleaning and patching to do before I report to the Man."

"Oh? What happened?" She tried to sound cool, but her hand shook as she tilted a generous slug of tequila into her glass.

"They wasted the Mexicans so they could keep the payoff for themselves."

Her lips formed an O and she sagged into her chair. "They killed the dealers and kept the fifty?"

He nodded.

"And then—and then they ran off and left me," she said, on the brink of tears.

"Well—you might say that. You certainly won't be seeing them again." He sighed. "I'm sorry about this, Wendy, I hope you didn't have anything going with either of those guys."

She shook her head. "Not really. It was only for kicks—and the money. Just the same—" She began to cry. "Just the same, it was a rotten thing to do to me. Now I'm stranded. And broke."

"No, you're not. How much were they going to give you for playing mule?"

"Three thousand in front. And ten percent of their share of the profits."

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"Three thousand, huh? From what I know about them, you'd be lucky to get three hundred in front. And zero percent of the profits. Listen, kid, you can't tell a joker from an ace and you're trying to deal in a big dirty game with old pros. If I give you a stake will you promise me you'll grab the next plane out of here and go back to Ohio?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what I want to do. I'll leave on the first plane in the morning. That's a promise!"

He handed her one of the five-grand packets he had stowed in his pocket.

She fingered the hundreds, making a rough count, then stared at him wide-eyed. "I'm not sure you're not the Man!"

He answered with an enigmatic smile and then said, "If you come back, Wendy, I'll be the first to hear it. And I'll make you wish you'd never left home."

Once outside the Rosita he found it was still early. He had an oppressive sense of detachment from the reveling tourists but he didn't want to return to the ship. He thought of going into one of the cafés like Carlos O'Brian's, where there would be bright lights and noisy chatter. But food was out of the question. And a lonely drink would be utterly depressing. So he sat on the retaining wall near the Rosita and smoked a couple of cigarettes.

After a bit he began to feel better and decided to saunter toward O'Brian's.

As he came within half a block he saw the Garretts leave. Their uniformed chauffeur hustled around to open the rear door of the limousine and Valerie climbed in. Ryan Garrett was about to follow when two men in black pants, T-shirts, and gloves stepped out from behind the limo to confront him. Both were wearing stocking masks and cradling stubby submachine guns. Threatening him with the guns, they gave him an order, and after a moment of hesitation he went along with them to a black Mercedes parked in front of the limousine. Passing the window from which Valerie peered out fearfully, one of the men tossed what seemed to be an envelope in to her. The chauffeur stood frozen.

Brock, once he understood the situation, had eased into the shadows at the entrance of a shop that was closed for the day. He had his .38 but it was nearly useless against two submachine guns unless with the element of surprise he could create an advantage.

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The men muscled Garrett into the back seat of the Mercedes, one remaining there to guard him, the other leaping behind the wheel and hurtling the car down the street toward Brock. As it came abreast of him, he darted out and fired at the driver with as much care as the scant seconds permitted.

He was quite certain that he had drilled the driver's window with the two slugs he got off and was sure the driver was wounded when he slumped over the wheel. But the Mercedes continued on course. The gunman beside Garrett leaned out and sent a burst of shots back at Brock. Gaining the cover of the shop entrance unharmed, he watched the Mercedes lean around a corner and vanish.

When Brock ran back to O'Brian's, half a dozen people, including a couple of waiters and the maitre d', had gathered around the limousine. Valerie, hunched in the back seat, was sobbing softly and reading the sheet of paper under the dome light.

Brock leaned in. "Valerie," he said.

She lifted moist eyes from the paper. "They've kidnapped him, Brock," she said tearfully, "and they're demanding a huge ransom. Oh my God, what'll I do!"

"I'll go with you to the police."

"No!" she said with a firm shake of her head. "If I bring in the police they'll kill him! And, oh, Brock, he's everything to me. I won't risk his life."

He nodded. "Very well."

She brushed at her eyes. "Besides," she went on, "we're in a foreign country and even if they were eager to cooperate I'm not sure that the police could handle the situation."

"That's true," he agreed. He hesitated. "I have a little experience in these matters. If I could be of help to you—"

"Oh, *would* you, Brock?" she pleaded.

"What can I do?" he answered.

"Would it be possible for you to talk to Mr. Fenwick, the president of Ryan's holding company in New York and tell him what's happened?"

"Yes, I could do that, Valerie—though he'd be more apt to listen to you."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to him first," she said, and a look of hard determination crossed her face before it crumpled and she began to cry

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again. Then with an effort she composed herself and said, "Please get in, Brock, we haven't a minute to waste."

The chauffeur had moved away and was talking to the huddle of people who had come out from O'Brian's. "Miguel!" Valerie called.

As Brock settled himself beside her on the back seat, the chauffeur hurried over and bent inside. He was a plump little man with a round face and an earnest expression. "Yes, ma'am." He touched his cap.

"Miguel," she said severely, "this is Mr. Brock. He's an investigator for our government. He's to be trusted."

Miguel extended his hand. "It is an honor to know you, sir," he said and they shook hands.

"Now let's get out of here, Miguel," said Valerie.

Miguel touched his cap, slid behind the wheel, and drove off, Valerie instructing him to deliver them to the quay so that they could board a shore boat that would return them to the *Sunland Queen*. During the short ride she turned to Brock and said, "I want you to know that I think it was terribly brave of you to risk your life attempting to save Ryan from those men. I'll always remember it. And so will Ryan, if you ever need a friend."

Then, after a thoughtful pause, she asked, "Do you know why those men were dressed in black, Brock?"

"It may have no special significance," he told her. "If I were to commit a crime in the darkness I couldn't ask for a better camouflage than black."

"A crime," she said. "They could be terrorists raising money for a cause—that's what you think too, isn't it?"

When they alighted from the limousine, Valerie asked Miguel to remain in her employ until further notice at double the usual fee, and to be available at a moment's notice, twenty-four hours a day.

When they had boarded the cruise ship, Valerie led Brock to her stateroom. She took ice from the refrigerator and nervously splashed Scotch over it in two glasses. When Brock was settled into a chair with the drink, she passed him the ransom note. It was neatly typed in capital letters and read:

YOUR HUSBAND WILL BE SAFE WITH US IF YOU FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE LETTER: 1. DO NOT INFORM THE MEXICAN OR U.S. POLICE OR HE DIES! 2. PREPARE FOR

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DELIVERY IN EXACTLY 48 HOURS THE CASH SUM OF ONE MILLION TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND U.S. DOLLARS, ALL USED BILLS, ALL HUNDREDS. 3. BUT FOR YOUR DRIVER, YOU MUST BE ALONE WHEN DELIVERY IS MADE. 4. AT NINE P.M. THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW, BRING THE CASH TO THE LOBBY OF THE CAMINO REAL HOTEL AND WAIT THERE FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS. 5. FOR EVERY DAY THAT YOU ARE LATE WITH THE RANSOM, WE WILL SEND YOU SOMETHING FROM YOUR HUSBAND. THE FIRST DAY YOU WILL HAVE HIS ARM, THE SECOND HIS LEG. ON THE THIRD YOU WILL HAVE HIS HEAD! SO BE WARNED. AND BEWARE OF THE LEAST DEVIATION FROM THESE DEMANDS!

BLACK IS THE COLOR OF DEATH. AND BLACK IS WHAT YOU WILL WEAR IF YOU FAIL US!

"What do you think?" she asked anxiously when he had finished reading the note.

"I think they mean business. I'd bet they're well organized. One million two is an odd sum to ask—it probably reflects a split. If there are four of them—two more behind the scenes—each would get three hundred grand."

"Only Ryan's safety matters," she said. "The money's not important. Anyhow, I don't suppose there's any way to avoid paying it."

He shook his head. "If we were in the States, yes—maybe. But here in Vallarta—forget it."

"But when the payoff is made, Brock, will they release him?"

"Probably, yes. But it's always a gamble, Valerie. It's a chance you'll have to take."

She set her glass on the table with a decisive thump, and reached for the phone. She placed a radio call to Calvin Fenwick, president of Garrett's holding company, and, after an interminable wait, got him at his home on Long Island. She gave him an account of the kidnapping, read him the ransom note, and then she put Brock on the line, introducing him as an undercover agent of the FBI who had witnessed the kidnapping and risked his life in an attempt to save Ryan from being carried off.

Fenwick was duly impressed with the false status Valerie had unwittingly given Brock. He listened with respect as Brock detailed the situ-

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ation and gave his opinion of the risks involved if the local police were given the green to take over. After some deliberations, Fenwick concluded that there was no other choice but to pay the ransom. It would be a mad scramble to gather that much cash in time, but he'd find a way and it would be done. He would personally fly the money to Puerto Vallarta on a company jet and deliver it to Valerie no later than five P.M. the day after tomorrow—sooner if possible.

After Valerie signed off, Brock suggested that he don a uniform and go along as the driver when she paid the ransom. At first she thought it was a fine idea, but then it occurred to her that the kidnappers might have a man watching from the outset at the Camino Real. And if he saw there was a switch to an American driver who could be an armed private cop in radio contact with the police, her husband would be killed.

But she agreed to his alternate plan: well in advance, at an isolated spot, he would secrete himself in the trunk of the limousine. He would not leave the trunk unless there was some unexpected development and Valerie was in danger. Then Miguel would fetch him to the rescue.

True to his word, Calvin Fenwick flew in on a company jet with a million two hundred thousand in cash. He arrived early, shortly after four in the afternoon, but Valerie, chauffeured by Miguel, was already at the airport to meet him and take possession of the three suitcases in which the hundreds were packed. Brock was waiting in the bar at Camino Real and she phoned him with the news, adding that she was going to have dinner with Fenwick, who would stay on until Ryan was released.

At eight-thirty that evening, Brock was hidden in the shadows of a dim side street near the Camino Real. When Miguel pulled in at the curb, he quickly opened the trunk, which had been left ajar, and slipped inside, pulling the lid down after him and fastening it with a loop of wire Miguel had attached for the purpose. The arrangement allowed a bit of air to get through, and made it possible for him to escape at a moment's notice.

With the money in the back seat, the limousine rolled back to the hotel, where Valerie sat in the lobby awaiting instructions from the kidnappers. At ten past nine, the limousine took off for its destination.

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Soon the car began to tilt upward, telling Brock that they were rising into the hills. The jolting ride seemed long in the stuffy trunk, but it wasn't much over fifteen minutes before Miguel braked to a stop and silenced the motor. After a muted exchange between Valerie and the chauffeur, the pair could be heard climbing out and removing the money cases. There was then a sound of doors closing and footsteps moving off.

Immediately Brock opened the trunk and climbed out. The limousine was parked just off the road in a cluster of trees. On a tree at the edge of the road three small red reflectors had been nailed. Grouped so that they formed a pyramid, they were obviously designed to mark the spot where Miguel was meant to stop.

They were in an area above the ocean on a high cliff, toward the edge of which Valerie and the chauffeur were moving, Miguel toting two of the suitcases, Valerie the third. In the gloom about a hundred feet beyond, Brock saw the two halt and set the cases on the ground. Moving rapidly and softly in his sneakers, Brock reached a point near the rim of the cliff that placed him at a safe distance and lay prone behind a boulder.

He groped beneath his jacket and unstrapped his binoculars, focusing them so as to observe Miguel as he hoisted one of the money cases into a deep wicker basket that had apparently been left at the edge of the cliff for the purpose. Two neatly coiled ropes were secured to the basket—one to its sturdy handle, the other to the bottom.

As Brock watched, Miguel began to lower the basket with its prize burden down the face of the cliff. Far below, there was a narrow ribbon of beach, caressed by a gentle surf. The tall forbidding cliffs stretched for winding miles in either direction, dipping here, rising there, splashed with houses eyeing the panorama of rugged coastline and turquoise sea.

As Miguel continued to lower the basket, Valerie stood tensely watching. Her face, an exquisite cameo in the wan moonlight, was drawn.

When the basket had completed its long descent to the beach, at times bouncing off a projection, Miguel upended it with a yank of the bottom rope, a case with a third of the money tumbled to the sand, then he swiftly hauled the basket back again. The process was then repeated. Brock aimed his glasses out to sea, slowly traversing, moving

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inland, and following the coast, but failing to pinpoint the craft he believed to be out there. It had to be small, fast, unlighted, and drifting in readiness to speed ashore, draw the cases aboard, and move swiftly off again under cover of night and the vastness of the Pacific.

He was shifting his view from the ocean and returning to Valerie and Miguel, when beyond them to the right, where the cliff formation declined somewhat and curved toward the sea, he caught two sudden winks of light. He thought they came from an area at the summit or just below. But they were mere firefly flashes, gone in a second, and not repeated when he hastily tilted the glasses up, scanning in vain. Yet they were signals, all right, beamed out to sea—probably from one of the houses along the summit.

But Miguel was just then lowering the third case and it was time to move. He dashed off on silent feet, ducked back into the trunk, and wired it closed. Minutes later they were rolling down from the hills and he was lifting the lid of the trunk a foot or two, enough to take his bearings for the return trip in his Pinto.

When the lemon-pale light of dawn swept the horizon, Brock was prone behind the same boulder at the cliff, his binoculars tightening on every house along the summit. There was a fresh depression in the sand below where a boat had rested while the money was picked up, summoned, Brock was convinced, by that signal from one of the houses situated at a point where Miguel and Valerie had been observed. In which case, Ryan Foster Garrett was being held in that very house.

Valerie was waiting for her husband now on the ship, frantic, not knowing if he'd be released or killed.

As daylight gave clearer definition to the cliff-hugging houses, Brock examined them and settled on one that gave him cause for special wonder. A meandering white stucco ranch house with a typical red-tile roof, it was set on the promontory, isolated from its neighbors, and faced the beach where the ransom had been deposited. A flashing signal from it could be seen for miles out on the ocean.

But the curious factor that excited Brock's interest was the condition of its windows. They were blind—all of them tightly sealed with aluminum storm shutters. Moreover, the grass was uncut. Shrubs and flowers were growing wild, many dead or dying. Altogether, the place had a look of long desertion.

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He had made up his mind to circle around for a look at the house when a man in navy-blue trousers and a white shirt stepped from behind it. He walked to the railing at the edge of the cliff and stood peering down at the ribbon of beach where the boat had picked up the ransom, lighting a cigarette and puffing it thoughtfully.

He was a bald man in his fifties with homely features—his thick nose, heavy lips, and great block of a jaw giving him a bulldog appearance. Brock was almost certain he had seen the man before. Yet, though his mind raced, sifting faces in the recent and distant past, he couldn't find a peg to hang him on. And for the moment he gave it up, even as the man flipped his cigarette over the cliff and headed back toward the house with a determined stride, vanishing when he turned in at the far side of a two-car garage.

From such a distance the sound of a car starting could not be heard and the driveway at the back of the house was invisible. All the same, in his mind Brock could hear the car's motor, could see it wheeling off, and though he guessed he would be too late he bolted for the Pinto.

There might have been a chance, but he was not familiar with the roads, made a wrong turn, and had to retrace. And the house was much further removed than it seemed because he couldn't travel in a straight line and had to circle around. He didn't meet a single car enroute, and when he finally found the place the garage was empty.

The wrought-iron gate was padlocked, but he opened it with gadgets from his pocket kit. In a garbage pail he uncovered scissored bits of black cloth and the stockings used for masks. He picked the lock of the back door and softly groped his way through the shuttered house.

In a rear bedroom he saw a key poking from the locked door and, entering, he discovered Ryan Garrett. Still dressed in his blue pullover and white slacks, the latter now rumpled and dirt-smeared, he was stretched on a narrow bed, his hands and feet chained to the iron bedstead, a blindfold tightly sealing his eyes.

The chains were padlocked but Brock tooled them open and released Garrett, who cursed him with the talent of an old sailor.

But when Brock led him, stumbling and stiff, out into the daylight and Garrett saw who he was and heard the story of how his rescue had been accomplished, he was apologetic and profuse with his gratitude.

"They got the ransom," he said, "but still they left me to die. You saved my life!"

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As they drove off, Brock noted a sign proclaiming the house was for sale, and that was another piece of the puzzle. At the quay where Brock left him, Garrett slapped his back and gave his hand a hearty shake. Then he said, "Thanks are hardly enough, my friend, you deserve a handsome reward. Fortunately, I'm a rich man and I can afford to be generous. If you'll come to my stateroom in a couple of hours after I've had an opportunity to visit with my wife, I'm going to present you with a check for three thousand dollars!" He beamed. "How's *that* strike you?"

"It strikes me as positively magnanimous, sir, and I'm deeply touched."

Garrett's smile slipped a little, but it was restored by the humble expression on Brock's face. With a parting squeeze applied affectionately to Brock's shoulder, he turned and went to catch the shore boat.

Brock ate an enormous breakfast at the Camino Real, strolled about town nosing in the little shops, turned his Pinto in at the rental agency, and walked out to the quay to await a shore boat to the *Sunland Queen*. When it arrived from the ship, Ryan Garrett, now dressed in an expensively tailored grey business suit, was among the first to alight.

"I'm on my way to the airport," he said. "I have to confer with Cal Fenwick, my top executive, and the Mexican police. Then I'm going to take the company jet back to the States, hire some detectives to run the kidnappers down, and recover the ransom money before it's all spent." He cocked his head. "Say, you wouldn't like to give us a hand, would you? There would be a nice little fee in it for you."

"No thanks, Mr. Garrett. I have other matters I must attend to."

Garrett nodded. "Look me up when you get home; we'll lift a few together. Meanwhile, my wife is remaining on board and she'll have your check."

In the afternoon, shortly before the ship sailed, Brock went forward on the promenade deck to collect his reward from Valerie Garrett. He was approaching along the passageway when the door to her stateroom opened and a ship's officer stepped out. As he went past, offering a spare smile and waving a casual salute, Brock recognized him at once. He was the purser, keeper of ship funds and passenger valuables. A stocky man with the face of a benign bulldog.

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Seated across from Valerie in the stateroom, the three-thousand-dollar check in his hand, Brock ran it all down for her, told her how he knew she had plotted with the purser to grab her husband for a take of one million two hundred thousand, using Brock himself to convince Fenwick that the ransom must be paid. "And don't try to snow me with the innocent routine," he concluded, "it's been tried by experts."

She shrugged. "Well, if you really are with the FBI, I suppose you're going to have me arrested."

He shook his head. "I'm not with the FBI and never once did you believe that I was, though it made for a great story to light a fire under Fenwick. And, no, I'm not going to have you arrested." He folded the check. "But don't think that this absurd little token of your husband's appreciation is going to satisfy me." He lighted a cigarette and eased back comfortably in his chair. "For the moment, Valerie, you can simply satisfy my curiosity by telling me *why?*"

She made a wry face. "You've got the answer there in your hand. For all his millions, Ryan is just plain cheap. Of course you didn't actually save his life, because Howie Wicks, the purser, had an accomplice—a local Mexican bad-boy he hired, who was supposed to give the police an anonymous tip as to where Ryan could be found.

"But if Ryan rewards a man he *thinks* saved his life with only three thousand dollars, can you imagine the grand sums of money he gives me? Sure, we live like royalty, but I haven't had so much as a thousand from that man to call my own since we were married."

"So why didn't you divorce him and collect on the settlement?"

She snorted. "Before we were married I had to sign a legal document stating that I wouldn't get a penny of his if I divorced him. But now when it all blows over I'll be able to divorce him, and I'll have a cool million tucked away in a Swiss account."

"The remaining two hundred grand going to Wicks?"

She nodded. "Less whatever he had to pay his Mexican helper."

Brock shook his head. "And I suppose the purser brought your million aboard?"

She grinned.

"So how did you ever get involved with this Wicks? He's certainly not much to look at."

She laughed. "Oh heavens!—there's nothing in the least intimate between us. We're just partners. We've traveled the world on this ship

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and I've gotten to know him. Ryan is eternally distracted with business and Howie and I have had many a long talk. When I discovered that he had a larcenous streak and would do almost anything if the price was right, we struck up a bargain."

"Yeah, one million for you and two hundred thou for him. Not bad, Valerie. But I have a hunch that you'll be paying me an appropriate tax on that million."

"Sure," she said, "we'll work something out that will make you very happy. But no hurry," she added with a teasing little smile. "Most of the cruise is yet to come. We'll have several days at sea and three in Acapulco. Let's live a bit, enjoy the spoils."

"I'd drink to that," said Brock with a grin, "if I had one."

She bounced up. "I'll fix us martinis. Then, after the ship sails, I'll order a special dinner and have the steward serve it here." She brightened. "With champagne, of course. How does that sound?"

"Almost as good as the rustle of hundred dollar bills being counted," he answered cheerfully.

She laughed and he watched her cross to make the drinks. She was lovely, he thought, a splendid companion for a sea voyage. And she would be generous too, with her hard-earned million in the ship's safe.

More generous, no doubt, than she ever intended to be.

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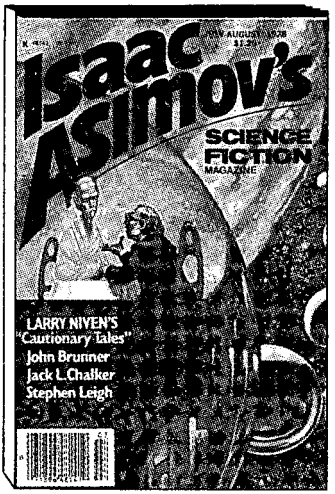

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